



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



FRIDAY — 14 JAN 2022

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HEADLINE	01/14 SKorea restrictions for Lunar New Year
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/14/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#south-korea-extends-restrictions-for-lunar-new-year

GIST	<p>South Korea said on Friday that it would suspend its reopening plan for three more weeks to prepare for a possible surge of Omicron cases before and during the Lunar New Year holiday.</p> <p>The curbs will extend past Feb. 2, when the three-day holiday ends. Before the pandemic, tens of millions of South Koreans — and many more in China and other East Asian countries — would travel to attend family reunions around Lunar New Year.</p> <p>Under South Korea’s current rules, unvaccinated people are barred from many public facilities, and restaurants and bars are required to close at 9 p.m. Over the Lunar New Year holiday, train tickets will be sold only for window seats and people will be asked to refrain from traveling, officials said.</p> <p>“In many countries, the medical system is on the verge of collapse, because it cannot withstand the explosive spread of Omicron,” Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum said on Friday. “We are also announcing new pandemic countermeasures today in preparation for Omicron, which will come like a huge wave.”</p> <p>South Korea’s hospitalizations and deaths have remained stable in the past month, and daily new infections have declined steadily to 4,542 on Friday from 5,567 on Dec. 14, according to government data. While Delta has remained the dominant variant, Omicron might overtake it over the next three weeks, Mr. Kim said.</p> <p>But on Friday, in a setback for the government’s strategy, a court ordered the authorities in Seoul, the capital, to suspend enforcement of vaccine passes for adults visiting large stores and for adolescents generally. The court said the passes restricted access to some facilities that were “essential for basic living.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/14 Philippines schools ‘health break’ in surge
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/14/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#covid-philippines-schools
GIST	<p>MANILA — Teachers and students in the Philippine capital are being placed on what officials describe as a weeklong “health break” to recover from Covid or care for loved ones infected with the virus as the country experiences a record number of cases fueled by the rapidly spreading Omicron variant.</p> <p>And on Friday, the country’s Education Department expanded on that move by announcing that primary schools in five highly urbanized provinces south of the capital, Manila, were being closed until the end of the month.</p> <p>“The city of Manila is declaring no classes at all levels, private and public school,” Mayor Francisco Domagoso said on Thursday, adding that teachers and students would have a week “to rest and hopefully recover” or give them a breather as they care for their loved ones.</p> <p>“The parents’ anxiety level for their kids are increasing,” he said, and “this goes as well for the teacher.”</p> <p>The measure may seem less like a breather for parents, who have already had to help their children through one of the world’s longest periods of classroom closures. Schools reopened in November in areas of the country where virus transmission rates were low after well over a year of virtual lessons, but officials said the Omicron variant had forced a rethinking of the loosening in restrictions.</p> <p>The country’s Health Department reported 37,027 new cases on Friday — a record high that officials blamed on the Omicron variant. The figure brings to 3.1 million the total number of virus cases during the pandemic, while nearly 53,000 people have died.</p> <p>A recent survey conducted by the Alliance of Concerned Teachers, a group that represents teachers and educators in the House of Representatives, found that 50 percent of its members in Manila had reported being sick with flu-like symptoms while still carrying out teaching duties.</p>

	<p>The government on Friday extended its coronavirus restrictions in Manila and other provinces until the end of the month. Those measures include capacity limits for restaurants, malls, parks, sports venues, fitness studios, cinemas, as well as exhibitions and social events. Children under 18 are also barred from leaving their homes in much of the country.</p> <p>“Since the Omicron variant was detected in the country, the government has been closely monitoring Covid-19 cases as we recognize that this variant, given its characteristics, would most likely lead to a rise in the number of Covid cases, just as it has in other countries,” Karlo Nograles, a presidential spokesman, told a news briefing.</p> <p>“I think it is clear that this variant is more transmissible,” he said, though he stressed that because of the government’s aggressive vaccination drive, infected people were not experiencing severe illness.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/14 Hospitals pushed to brink two dozen states
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/14/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#omicron-pushes-hospitals-to-the-brink-in-two-dozen-us-states
GIST	<p>The extremely contagious Omicron variant is fueling an enormous coronavirus wave that is pushing hospitals close to their capacity limits in about two dozen states, according to data posted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.</p> <p>At least 80 percent of staffed hospital beds were occupied in 24 states on Thursday, including Georgia, Maryland and Massachusetts, the figures show.</p> <p>More troubling, the data showed that in 18 states and Washington, D.C., at least 85 percent of beds in adult intensive care units were full, with the most acute scarcity of beds in Alabama, Missouri, New Mexico, Rhode Island and Texas.</p> <p>The pressure on I.C.U. capacity comes as the Omicron variant has touched off a nearly vertical rise in infections and hospitalizations. The country as a whole and 26 states have reported more coronavirus cases in the past week than in any other seven-day period.</p> <p>In that time, an average of more than 803,000 coronavirus cases have been reported each day in the United States, an increase of 133 percent from two weeks ago, according to a New York Times database, and 25 states and territories have reported their highest weekly caseloads yet. Deaths are up 53 percent to an average of roughly 1,871 a day.</p> <p>That has helped push the country’s average rate of hospitalizations above last winter’s peak. Hospitalizations of people testing positive for coronavirus over that week are up to more than 148,000 a day, a record. The numbers are rising fastest in Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, according to the Times database.</p> <p>(The hospitalization figures include people who test positive for the virus after being admitted for conditions unrelated to Covid-19, but there is no national data showing how many people are in that category.)</p> <p>Since Thanksgiving, the White House has sent more than 350 military doctors, nurses, medics and other personnel to 24 states to help hospitals with staffing challenges, President Biden said this week, and plans to send an additional 1,000 service members to six hard-hit states. That is in addition to the more than 14,000 National Guard members deployed in 49 states to help staff hospitals and other medical facilities, he and other officials said.</p> <p>On Wednesday, Gov. Tim Walz of Minnesota said the state would spend \$40 million in federal funds to hire more staff to help hospitals there for the next 60 days because “we know we’re going to continue to see a sharp rise in cases from the Omicron variant.” Minnesota’s hospitals have been struggling to keep up</p>

since the fall, when the [National Guard](#) was called in to help with a flood of patients infected by the deadlier Delta variant.

Also Wednesday, Gov. Kate Brown of Oregon said she was sending an additional 700 members of the state's National Guard — bringing the total deployed to 1,200 members — to help hospitals deal with a rise in coronavirus patients. "Our hospitals are under extreme pressure," she wrote on Twitter.

One day earlier Gov. Janet Mills of Maine said she was [activating 169](#) members of the National Guard to help with capacity constraints at hospitals, joining more than 200 members already deployed in the state.

"I wish we did not have to take this step," Ms. Mills said in a statement, "but the rise in hospitalizations — caused primarily by those who are not vaccinated — is stretching the capacity of our health care system thin, jeopardizing care for Maine people, and putting increased strain on our already exhausted health care workers."

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HEADLINE	01/13 Record number hospital safety complaints
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/wa-hospital-workers-filed-record-number-of-workplace-safety-complaints-last-year-unions-say/
GIST	<p>Washington hospital workers filed a record number of workplace safety complaints last year, the state's health care unions reported Thursday — another reminder of the exhaustion and burnout nurses, technicians, therapists, aides and other health care staff have struggled with during the pandemic.</p> <p>The complaints add to ongoing tensions between many hospital leaders and their staff, who for months have said they don't get enough support from their employers. They have called on hospitals to do more, particularly around overtime policies and financial aid.</p> <p>Hospitals, meanwhile, acknowledge the state is barreling toward a health care crisis made worse by short staffing, delayed care and a recent spike in COVID-19 hospitalizations as the omicron variant takes hold in the region. But many have been slow, or unresponsive, to address their workers' demands, unions say.</p> <p>"The crisis was bad with delta. It's even worse with omicron," Jane Hopkins, vice president of SEIU Healthcare 1199NW and former Harborview Medical Center nurse, said in an interview Thursday. "Morale is low — lowest it's ever been."</p> <p>In 2021, hospital workers — represented by UFCW 21, SEIU Healthcare 1199NW and the Washington State Nurses Association — filed more than 8,600 workplace safety complaints, according to the three labor unions.</p> <p>In comparison, in 2019, the unions' hospitals workers submitted 2,865 complaints.</p> <p>The complaints largely reference a lack of staff safety, shortages or inadequate equipment, and other patient concerns, the statement said.</p> <p>"People are quitting because of dangerous staffing practices that have gone ignored for far too long," Hopkins said in the statement. "There's no use in increasing our workforce if they're just going to burn out within a year. We need to recruit more health care workers to the bedside, but we also need to make sure they can do their jobs safely."</p> <p>Hospital leaders, in a regularly scheduled Thursday news conference, again recognized how overburdened many of their staff members are, calling them the "backbone" of health care, but provided few details in response to workers' ongoing requests.</p>

“It has been an extraordinary time in health care and we have not been providing care under normal circumstances,” Taya Briley, vice president of the Washington State Hospital Association, said in the briefing. “Earlier in the pandemic, for example, we were very stretched for personal protective equipment. We have been stretched for staff. We have been stretched for other resources, like beds.

“To that end, it’s maybe not surprising that staff are expressing concerns,” she continued.

Some short-term help from the state is on its way — Gov. Jay Inslee on Thursday announced the [Washington National Guard will help staff hospitals and testing sites across the state](#), including in Everett, Spokane, Wenatchee and Yakima, to help with nonmedical tasks in order to help relieve crowded situations in emergency rooms. But many health care staffers say long-term aid is needed.

Many Washington hospitals have started offering retention or COVID bonuses to staffers asked to work extra shifts, including Virginia Mason Franciscan Health, Swedish Health Services and Overlake Medical Center in Bellevue. But other large health care systems, like UW Medicine, have yet to do the same.

Other hospital leaders in Thursday’s briefing pointed to food-related support, like free meals or organizing mobile food trucks to visit hospital campuses. Swedish chief executive Elizabeth Wako said the hospital is “focusing on mental health and wellness,” and is providing child and elderly care for staff.

Other health care systems, [like EvergreenHealth in Kirkland](#), have implemented mindfulness programs to try and limit worker burnout, including a [Code Lavender initiative](#), which provides employees with “emotional first aid.”

Still, many of the state’s hospital workers say they’re desperate for more specific changes to hospital care policies, like limiting nurse-to-patient ratios or better enforcing the state’s existing break and overtime laws.

“Our health care workers don’t need taco trucks right now,” Hopkins said. “They need safe staffing standards.”

Legislative solutions

The state’s three largest health care worker unions endorsed a bill this week aimed at improving worker and patient safety by creating new staffing standards in Washington, though the state hospital association said Thursday it has some concerns.

[Senate Bill 5751](#) — introduced by Sen. June Robinson, D-Everett, and Rep. Marcus Riccelli, D-Spokane — proposes nurse-to-patient ratios limited to one emergency department nurse to three noncritical patients, or one nurse to one trauma or critical care patient, and one ICU nurse to one to two patients, depending on their stability.

Other units, like oncology, psychiatric or pediatric, have higher proposed ratios, such as one nurse to five or six patients.

All hospitals, with a few exceptions, would have two years to implement the minimum staffing standards, according to the bill.

The bill also proposes hospital staffing committees develop plans for patient-care units, shift schedules must have at least 50% of members be nonsupervisory staffers, employers must better enforce meal and rest breaks, and ending mandatory overtime policies.

“The safe staffing bill makes it so hospitals can respond to emergencies like the one we’re experiencing right now,” Hopkins said Thursday. “This has to be the foundation for us to be able to keep health care workers safe.”

	<p>The state hospital association, however, is concerned the proposed legislation “has a lot of different ways restricting how staff can work,” Briley said Thursday, referring specifically to the proposed nurse-to-patient ratios.</p> <p>“We are very concerned about the potential of [a] type of restriction that means some patients simply won’t be able to get the care that they need,” Briley said.</p> <p>California is currently the only state in the country to require staffing ratios, though the state’s governor approved a temporary relaxing of the staffing standards during the winter 2020 COVID-19 surge, allowing nurses to take on higher patient loads, NPR reported.</p> <p>“This has been an issue and it continues to be an issue,” Hopkins said. “This pandemic has really shown that hospitals over the years ... made the system so inflexible that when there’s a crisis, we don’t have the staff to look after patients.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 Pierce Co. schools adjust Covid guidelines
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/pierce-county-lowers-isolation-time-changes-covid-guidelines/281-8c408d5b-c9ed-435e-9398-2e38de40d606
GIST	<p>PIERCE COUNTY, Wash. — New information from the CDC is changing the way schools in Pierce County deal with COVID-19.</p> <p>School districts will now allow students to come back to school if five days have passed since testing positive with no symptoms, no symptoms are present, or symptoms are resolving, and they have no fever within the past 24 hours without medication.</p> <p>The CDC now reports that the science shows the majority of SARS-CoV-2 transmission occurs early in the course of illness, generally a day or two prior to the onset of symptoms and two to three days after.</p> <p>But the changes come as COVID cases are increasing significantly across Pierce County.</p> <p>The county saw 13 outbreaks in schools this week, according to data from the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department.</p> <p>Given the recent spike in cases, not everyone is convinced that this is the right move.</p> <p>Shannon Ergun, president of the Tacoma Education Association, says teachers are split on the changes.</p> <p>“Some of our educators are feeling like the new information is in line with the medical recommendations and they’re feeling very confident with it. Some are feeling like they’re moving too fast and we may be too focused on keeping schools open and not enough on health and safety,” Ergun said.</p> <p>Parents are also split on the changes depending on what their students' needs are.</p> <p>“It’s a lot better for younger children and children with learning disabilities because luckily my son does work from home but I’m not in the house to help my son stay focused on school,” said Jessica Boggs.</p> <p>“As far as schools go, I don’t understand why they would shorten the quarantine time, especially with more kids getting it,” Donavan Klug said.</p> <p>But even with the changes, Ergun says there are still basic questions the county must answer.</p> <p>“How do we ensure that the kids in the room are getting a quality education?” Ergun asked. “How do we ensure that kids who need to be quarantined and are unable to attend are also getting a robust education? How do we keep the kids that aren’t sick, healthy? All of these things are major concerns.”</p>

HEADLINE	01/13 Seattle students plan walkout
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/seattle-students-plan-walkout-demanding-tighter-covid-safety-measures
GIST	<p>Some students in Seattle are planning a walkout, calling for remote learning and tighter coronavirus safety standards amid school closures and as more school staff and students are getting sick with the virus.</p> <p>One Cleveland High School senior and organizer for Friday's walk-out says students are fed up with some last-minute school closures and not knowing what the rest of the year could look like. She's expecting hundreds of students and others from the community to show.</p> <p>"It's scary to be in the building and we want to have safety in our classes and in the building and we're not getting that right now," senior Mia Dabney explained. "We want to have KN95s. We want to have transparency with the district."</p> <p>She's claiming SPS should have better prepared to make the shift to remote learning in anticipation of this latest COVID-19 spike, as Cleveland was among two SPS high schools closed Thursday amid staffing shortages, and after Franklin High School closed for two days earlier in the week.</p> <p>"This was so unpredictable for students and it really doesn't help with students' mental health," Franklin High School Sophomore Natalya McConnell added.</p> <p>Meanwhile, Franklin High School students started a petition urging the district to provide N95 masks and make regular coronavirus testing and vaccines available at schools. Franklin High School student leaders say they're also planning another so-called sick-out on Tuesday when they're scheduled to go back to school in-person.</p> <p>Students had the support of the teachers union vice president at a district board meeting Wednesday night.</p> <p>"What our students are feeling is a direct result of how our system is failing," Seattle Education Association Vice President Uti Hawkins said.</p> <p>At that same meeting, Interim Superintendent Dr. Brent Jones said the district is following state mandate and input from families who want them to maintain in-person learning, when possible.</p> <p>"Our objective is to continue to learn in-person safely. No health guidance is telling us to go remote," Dr. Jones stated.</p> <p>A spokesperson with SPS said testing is available whenever a student or their family feels they've been exposed. N95s aren't always available because of supply chain issues.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 More Seattle schools go online learning
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/several-schools-in-seattle-switch-to-temporary-remote-learning-due-to-covid-surge
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - Several Seattle schools will be switching to remote learning starting Friday due to a rise in COVID cases in the community and district.</p> <p>A handful of schools will operate on a two-hour delay on Friday. Double-check with your individual school to see a class schedule.</p> <p>The move comes after the district announced that it saw a record-high 704 confirmed COVID cases in just a week. Those cases included 145 staff members and 643 students.</p>

Return to Top	<p>The following schools will be remote:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aki Kurose Middle School, returns to in-person learning Monday, January 24. • Broadview-Thomson K-8 shifted to remote learning on Friday, January 14 for elementary students. Students in 6th – 8th grade will continue in person. In-person learning is expected to resume on Monday, January 24. • Franklin High School: In-person learning will resume Tuesday, January 18. • Lowell Elementary School shifted to remote learning on Wednesday, January 12. The earliest in-person learning can resume is Thursday, January 20. • Mercer Middle School: In-person learning is expected to resume on Monday, January 24. • Meany Middle School: In-person learning is expected to resume on Monday, January 24. • Olympic Hills Elementary: In-person learning is expected to resume on Monday, January 24. • South Shore PreK-8: In-person learning is expected to resume on Monday, January 24. There is no school for any student on Monday, Jan. 17 in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. day. <p>The surge in COVID cases is the largest the district has seen since it launched its dashboard in Sep. 2020. For comparison, the next-largest spike was between Dec. 11-17 at 139 cases, followed by 103 cases just a week later.</p> <p>As of Jan. 10, schools with the highest number of cases currently include Franklin High School at 94 cases, Roosevelt High School at 83, Ballard High School at 80 and Nathan Hale High School at 72.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 WSHA: hospitals in 'worst situation' yet
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/washington-hospitals-in-worst-situation-yet-since-covid-19-pandemic-started-wsha
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA, Wash. - Hospitals in Washington state are in their "worst situation" since the COVID-19 pandemic began, according to the Washington State Hospital Association.</p> <p>"This is the worst situation hospitals in Washington state have been in compared to any prior point during the pandemic," said Washington State Hospital Association Executive Vice President Taya Briley, RN. "We are experiencing a crisis across our medical system and sadly now we've now just reached 1 million Washingtonians who have been infected with COVID-19."</p> <p>Hospitals have stopped non-urgent procedures, she said.</p> <p>Briley said there was a significant shortage of staff and hospital beds. She said hospitals are caring for hundreds of patients who do not need to be there, and instead should be in nursing homes, other long-term care settings, or at home with home-care support.</p> <p>If those patients were moved out, she said, hospitals would have adequate staffing and space to manage the surge in cases with existing hospital resources.</p> <p>Briley called on the state to address several issues including assessing patients faster, paying nursing homes more so that they can retain staff, and potentially deploying the Washington National Guard to perform non-clinical work.</p> <p>She also said the "sizable majority" of hospitalized COVID patients are unvaccinated or have only one shot, and very few are boosted.</p> <p>Latest COVID-19 data in Washington state:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COVID-19 hospitalizations were at an average of 1,800 for the past week which just exceeded the state's previous high of 1,700 in Sept. 2021. • Briley said there has been a 65% increase in COVID cases in the past week, averaging 226 new COVID hospitalizations each day and 12-20 COVID deaths in the last week.

- Of those in the hospital, the average number of patients on a ventilator was up 16% at 149 patients.
- Western Washington is experiencing the surge at the moment, but Eastern Washington is soon expected to see an uptick

Increase in vaccine breakthrough cases

The Washington State Department of Health on Thursday reported an increase in ["vaccine breakthrough"](#) cases as omicron causes a spike in overall COVID-19 cases statewide.

According to the data dashboard, current reporting shows a 43% increase in the number of breakthrough cases. There have been 123,365 vaccine breakthrough cases between Jan. 17, 2021 - Jan. 1, 2022. The majority of individuals with confirmed breakthrough cases experience mild or no symptoms. At least 3% of them were hospitalized.

State officials said these cases make up about 2.5% of the vaccinated population. More than 4.8 million people in Washington state are up-to-date on their COVID-19 vaccines.

According to the state: "A person is considered to have vaccine breakthrough if they test positive for COVID-19 using a PCR test or antigen test and received their final dose of the COVID-19 vaccine more than two weeks prior to the positive test. Additional investigations help us better understand clinical and outbreak information when vaccine breakthrough happens."

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HEADLINE	01/14 Surge: parents, teachers, students on edge
SOURCE	https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-01-14/la-na-schools-covid-surge
GIST	<p>Tierra Pearson suspected the winter months would mean a sharp surge in coronavirus cases. So the Chicago mother made sure she and her two sons — seventh- and 10th-graders — were fully vaccinated.</p> <p>“We were going to be prepared,” she recalled.</p> <p>But as she kept the TV news on around the clock over much of the last two weeks, watching in dismay as leaders of the Chicago Teachers Union and Mayor Lori Lightfoot battled over safety precautions and schools reopening, Pearson felt far from prepared. She felt helpless.</p> <p>“We as parents were totally left out of the conversation,” she said. “We had no voice about our schools, and that was truly a shame.”</p> <p>As the Omicron variant continues to propel a massive surge in infections that has hit many educators and school staff, parents across the nation are faced with painful déjà vu: toggling between virtual and in-person schooling and trying to keep up with constantly evolving district policies.</p> <p>This week the Biden administration announced that it is planning to make 10 million COVID-19 test kits available each month for schools as part of its push to keep classrooms open during this wave of infections — a critical step considering that vaccination rates are lower among children.</p> <p>Overall, 63% of Americans are fully vaccinated, but among children ages 12 to 17 the rate sits at 54% and among those 5 to 11, the rate drops to 17%. (In Vermont, 48% of that age group are vaccinated; in California, nearly 19%; and in Mississippi, 5%.)</p> <p>But disruptions have occurred and at regular intervals.</p> <p>On average, about 4% of schools across the country — 4,179 of 98,000 schools — dealt with COVID-19 disruptions such as closures this week, according to Burbio, a K-12 school opening tracker. That’s down slightly from 5,376 schools last week and a fraction of the peak that occurred around Labor Day 2020 when more than 60% of schools were closed, said Dennis Roche, Burbio’s co-founder.</p>

Most of the closures were in the Northeast and Midwest, but some schools were starting to close in the West and South, Roche said. In Minneapolis, schools will go virtual for two weeks starting Friday because of a surge in Omicron cases among teachers. In Louisville, Ky., Jefferson County Public Schools shifted to remote learning because of COVID staffing shortages, while in the Portland, Ore., metro area, school districts moved to remote learning due to surges in cases and teachers being out sick.

Across the U.S., students are threatening boycotts and walkouts. The Oakland Unified School District faces such a strike unless it addresses a list of pandemic health and safety concerns. Students want the district to return to remote learning unless it provides KN95 masks for all kids and are calling for increased testing, among other demands. On Jan. 7, 12 district schools were forced to close after teachers staged a “sickout,” citing COVID worries. About 500 teachers were reported absent. And in New York, hundreds of students in recent days boycotted classes and staged walkouts over concerns about testing and called for remote learning to be implemented.

“We’re really in a pressure cooker situation right now, because American families are holding up the economy, we’re holding up the healthcare system and then we’re also expected to hold up the public education system,” said Keri Rodrigues, president of the National Parents Union, a network of grass-roots parent groups. “A lot of families across this country are absolutely at their breaking point.”

For many parents who live paycheck to paycheck, taking a few days off when schools close can mean the difference between having groceries or not and making rent or not, Rodrigues said. Beyond the financial loss, many parents worried that their kids’ mental health and grades would deteriorate when schools switch to remote learning.

“When you close down schools over an abundance of caution, understand what you are asking of American families who are already at the brink,” she said.

This week the Clark County School District, which spans Las Vegas and is the nation’s fifth largest school system with more than 320,000 students, announced it was canceling classes for two days due to extreme staffing shortages.

Jessica Atlas, a 46-year-old single mother, was already frustrated with the school district for not planning activities for her son, Ashton, 9, while he quarantined this week after he caught the flu and she tested positive for the coronavirus.

“I feel like the bottom’s falling out,” Atlas said, noting that Ashton had not been sent home with any additional schoolwork.

“There should be a plan in place if you send kids home. But there’s no organization, no real leadership and no real plan to catch these babies falling all over the place.”

The district said there would be no remote learning on the canceled school days.

“I’m on the edge of my seat just waiting with anxiety,” she said. “Are we going backwards? Are we going to be shut down completely?”

In Atlanta, six metro school districts began classes online after winter break because of high COVID-19 case counts. But by Monday, all but one reopened to offer in-person classes — even as they continued to battle high case rates and staff shortages.

“One of the most consequential takeaways over the past 22 months is that there is no doubt our young people need the positive influences and safe spaces our employees and school campuses provide more than ever,” Mary Elizabeth Davis, superintendent of Henry County Schools south of Atlanta, wrote in a column for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. “Pandemic or no pandemic, our belief in the power of in-person

learning will remain strong, and we will continue to do everything we can to provide that wholesome experience for the success of our youth....”

Still, many students across the Atlanta area remained out of school.

Even as Atlanta Public Schools resumed in-person classes, Maria Arias, 46, a mother with two children in high school and two in day care, kept her kids home because her family had contracted COVID-19 over the winter break.

A grass-roots member of the Latino Assn. for Parents of Public Schools, Arias couldn’t go back to work as a server at a small ice cream parlor until her youngest children tested negative and could return to day care. “It’s just hard,” Arias said as she struggled to keep her older kids on task with their schoolwork.

In recent months, the issue of schools opening or closing has become a battle between politicians and unions.

Last week, President Biden said “we have no reason to think at this point that Omicron is worse for children than previous variants.”

“We know that our kids can be safe when in school, by the way. That’s why I believe schools should remain open. They have what they need,” he added.

Meanwhile, New York City Mayor Eric Adams, who took office this month, stood firm on plans to reopen schools in the new year. But in recent days, as cases in the city rise sharply, Adams has considered a virtual learning plan, but it has not been implemented.

Back in Chicago, the school district reopened this week after a two-week standoff between Lightfoot and the Chicago Teachers Union.

The union wanted the option to revert to remote instruction across the 350,000-student district, and without it, hundreds of teachers refused to teach in person for the last two weeks.

Still, Chicago leaders, including Lightfoot, rejected districtwide remote learning, saying that it’s detrimental to students and that schools are safe.

After several days of back-and-forth negotiations, both sides reached an agreement that included provisions for additional testing and metrics allowing for schools with major virus outbreaks to close and go virtual.

Natalie Neris, chief of community engagement at Kids First Chicago, a group that advocates for more resources for students, said the interests of families must be at the forefront of debates.

“Parents are the consistent stakeholder,” she said. “Everyone would benefit from recognizing their importance, listening to them more intently, and putting kids first daily.”

For Pearson, 32, a hybrid option provides a sense of ease. Last week, she began feeling sick and got tested along with her kids. Each of their results came back negative, except for her son who is in seventh grade, who tested positive. He had no symptoms. She kept him home from school this week.

“It’s all over the place with this virus, and things are changing daily,” she said. “Schools need to adjust and be flexible as well.”

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HEADLINE	01/14 China agrees w/US: release oil reserves
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/exclusive-china-agreed-with-us-oil-reserves-release-near-lunar-new-year-sources-2022-01-14/

GIST	<p>Jan 14 (Reuters) - China will release crude oil from its national strategic stockpiles around the Lunar New Year holidays that start on Feb. 1 as part of a plan coordinated by the United States with other major consumers to reduce global prices, sources told Reuters.</p> <p>The sources, who have knowledge of talks between the world's top two crude consumers, said China agreed in late 2021 to release an unspecified amount of oil depending on price levels.</p> <p>"China agreed to release a relatively bigger amount if oil is above \$85 a barrel, and a smaller volume if oil stays near the \$75 level," said one source, without elaborating.</p> <p>The release of crude stocks by China will occur around the Lunar New Year, the sources said. China will be closed for the biggest annual holiday from Jan. 31 to Feb. 6.</p> <p>China's National Food and Strategic Reserves Administration did not immediately respond to a request for comment.</p> <p>The agreed release of reserves by China is the result of a series of discussions, reported by Reuters in November, that the Biden administration held with other major oil consumers after tight supplies drove global oil prices to multi-year highs.</p> <p>Biden and top aides discussed the possibility of a coordinated release of crude stocks with close allies including Japan, South Korea and India, as well as with China.</p> <p>The United States has conducted crude swaps and sales from its reserves over the past few weeks while Japan and South Korea have also announced plans for crude sales.</p> <p>China, which has long kept details on its state reserves a secret, conducted last September its first-ever public crude reserves auction of about 7.4 million barrels, about half a day's consumption in the country.</p> <p>In November, the National Food and Strategic Reserves Administration said it was "working on" a release of crude reserves, but declined to comment on the U.S. request for the coordinated release among buyers.</p> <p>Oil prices rebounded above \$80 a barrel this week buoyed by supply disruptions in Libya and Kazakhstan, a fall in U.S. crude inventories to their lowest since 2018, and an improvement in the outlook for fuel demand in Europe as governments there ease COVID-19 restrictions.</p> <p>Benchmark Brent crude futures was at \$84.79 a barrel and U.S. West Texas Intermediate crude at \$82.23 a barrel at 0730 GMT.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/14 China tightens anti-coronavirus measures
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-winter-olympics-sports-health-beijing-32bcad4283011feeff66804e466dedbe
GIST	<p>BEIJING (AP) — China further tightened its anti-pandemic measures in Beijing and across the country on Friday as scattered outbreaks continued ahead of the opening of the Winter Olympics in a little over two weeks.</p> <p>The actions appear to reflect nervousness about a possible surge in cases ahead of the Beijing Games.</p> <p>Beijing has ordered children at international schools to be tested starting next week and is barring air passengers who transited via a third point. Citizens are being told only to travel if absolutely necessary, with no guarantee they will be permitted to return if found to have visited a city or region where an outbreak occurred.</p>

The city of Tianjin, about an hour from the capital, has ordered a third round of mass testing starting Saturday morning to be completed within 24 hours.

A port and manufacturing center with 14 million people, Tianjin is one of a half dozen cities where the government is imposing lockdowns and other restrictions as part of a policy to track down every virus case.

It's proximity to Beijing is particularly worrying and authorities have cut off all travel links between it and the Olympic host city following the discovery of 126 cases in recent days, all apparently of the highly contagious omicron variant.

Elsewhere, more than 20 million people are under lockdown, many restricted to their homes amid concerns over supplies of food and other daily necessities. Factories have been closed, affecting supplies of computer chips and other products.

Automaker Volkswagen AG said it shut down two factories in Tianjin on Monday and employees have been tested twice.

In the northern city of Xi'an, where a lockdown was imposed its 14 million people on Dec. 23, residents have been told their credit scores won't be affected if they are unable to make loan payments on time while in quarantine.

Even the city of Zhuhai in the far south has suspended flights to Beijing and bus service with the Guangdong provincial capital of Guangzhou.

Zhuhai has ordered citywide testing and barred residents from leaving without good reason and a negative COVID-19 test, despite the National Health Commission reporting no cases of local transmission in the city, which lies just across the border from the gambling mecca of Macao.

China has also banned dozens of overseas flights from Europe, Canada, the U.S., Indonesia and elsewhere after passengers tested positive for the virus upon arrival.

The financial hub of Shanghai, which has recorded relatively few cases, has also suspended some travel links.

China has imposed such sweeping restrictions on movement repeatedly since early 2020, soon after the virus was first detected in the central city of Wuhan.

Along with mass testing and digital surveillance of people's movements, the measures have kept the virus from spreading into a full-fledged national outbreak so far. The country's vaccination rate now also tops 85%.

Other countries that tried a similar zero-tolerance approach have abandoned it, deciding instead to try to live with the virus, while mitigating its worst effects.

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HEADLINE	01/14 Russia moves weaponry toward Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-moves-more-weaponry-toward-ukraine-keeps-the-west-guessing-11642161605
GIST	WASHINGTON—As diplomats were holding negotiations over the Ukraine crisis this week, Russia began moving tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, rocket launchers and other military equipment westward from their bases in its Far East, according to U.S. officials and social-media reports.

While the equipment is still in transit, officials and analysts are debating whether it represents the next phase in the Kremlin's buildup that has already placed [more than 100,000 troops](#) near its country's border with Ukraine.

"This stuff is almost certainly going to Ukraine," said Rob Lee, an expert on the Russian military and fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, a U.S. think tank. The military hardware, he said, is believed to be the first to be shifted in the current crisis from Russia's Eastern Military District, on the opposite end of the country.

Other officials and analysts suspect, however, that Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) is using the new military movements to pursue a strategy of keeping the West guessing about what he will do next, while simultaneously building negotiating leverage.

If deployed near Ukraine, the officials and analysts said, the new materiel would reinforce the Kremlin's options to use force—from large incursions to pinprick attacks—to try to weaken the pro-Western government in Kyiv, increase Russia's control in eastern Ukraine, batter the country's economy and prevent it from joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Mr. Putin has already surprised Western nations by massing forces near Ukraine and then presenting NATO with a proposed agreement that would halt the alliance's eastern expansion and require that U.S. and allied troops leave NATO's East and Central European members, which were formerly part of the Soviet Union or Soviet bloc.

Negotiations this week between Russia, the U.S., NATO and others failed to narrow the differences over that Kremlin proposal as well as a demand that the alliance cut military ties to Ukraine and other areas of the former Soviet Union.

The U.S. and its allies have said they will respond to an invasion with unprecedented economic sanctions on Russia, stepped-up support for Ukraine's defense and military reinforcements on NATO's eastern flank, closest to Russia.

Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, who led the U.S. delegation in negotiations with Russia this week, said following talks on Wednesday that Russia faced the choice whether to engage in further diplomacy or take military action against Ukraine. "And they may not even know yet," she added.

Russia's massing of forces near Ukraine, where more than 100,000 troops are in place, continues, U.S. officials said, and Mr. Putin has yet to heed calls for de-escalation. Those forces, the officials said, include combat-ready units equipped with sophisticated tanks, helicopters, artillery, short-range missile systems and electronic warfare equipment.

"That rough 100,000-troop figure could easily be augmented in a matter of a couple of weeks and evolve into something that's large enough to launch a multipronged, full-throttle invasion of Ukraine," said a senior State Department official, who declined to provide details. "It could be used to decoy and to engage in a more limited conventional operation. It could be used as part of a coercive diplomatic game."

The Conflict Intelligence Team, a group of Russian bloggers, posted photos of flatbed railcars carrying tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, trucks and mobile rocket systems. "In the past week, we and other researchers have noticed videos on social media showing military vehicles on trains in Russia's Far East, moving West," it wrote on Twitter on Wednesday. "Eyewitnesses report several trains per week or even per day."

The Pentagon declined to comment on the social-media reports of Russian forces being transported west. Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Thursday that two-thirds of Russian forces were out of their garrisons.

U.S. intelligence officials and diplomats emphasize that they don't know whether Mr. Putin has decided to invade Ukraine, as he did in 2014, when Russia annexed the Ukrainian territory of Crimea and established two breakaway republics in the country's eastern Donbas region.

A full-scale invasion and occupation of Ukraine, which has a population of 44 million, seems unlikely with Russia's current level of forces, former officials and analysts said.

Russian officials have said they don't plan to invade Ukraine, but Mr. Putin has also said that he is ready to carry out "military technical measures" if the West continues its "aggressive line."

Philip Breedlove, a retired Air Force general who served as the top NATO commander from 2013 to 2016, said Russian deployments provide Mr. Putin with a range of options short of a full invasion.

"The northern portion of Russian forces arrayed against Ukraine could easily drive due west through Belarus and arrive very close to Kyiv relatively unopposed," Gen. Breedlove said. "Ukraine's best forces are tied down on the line of contact on the border of Donbas. So this northern thrust would bypass the most capable Ukrainian forces."

Such a thrust could be used by the Kremlin to put pressure on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's government and attempt to force concessions or perhaps try to bring about its collapse, former officials and analysts said.

A separate group of Russian forces in the east, Gen. Breedlove said, could push into Donbas to support the Russian garrison there and Russian-backed separatists.

Still a third group of Russian forces in Crimea and southwest Russia could seize terrain along the coast and encircle the port city of Mariupol to cut it off from the rest of Ukraine.

"This would cause severe damage to Ukraine's agricultural-export economy," Gen. Breedlove said. "This force could further invade to secure the water supply north of Crimea, which is much needed by Russian forces there."

In addition to its troops, Russia has also moved ships that are normally stationed in the Caspian Sea to the Sea of Azov, whose shallow waters touch Ukraine and Russia and go into the Black Sea via the Kerch Strait. The vessels were sent there in April for exercises and didn't return home.

Among those ships are amphibious vessels that could easily bring Russian troops to Ukrainian shores, taking advantage of the Russian naval dominance in those waters.

"If they wanted to do some kind of amphibious operation it would be very hard to prevent them from doing it," said retired Adm. James Foggo, the dean of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Maritime Strategy, a think tank.

Phillip Karber of the Potomac Foundation, a policy-research organization, said that Ukrainian forces are capable of defending against attacks emanating from Donbas and across the causeway from Crimea.

"Ukrainian forces would be hard pressed to cover a much broader front that stretches from Belarus in the north to the Black Sea in the south," said Dr. Karber, who has regularly been to the front lines in Ukraine. "The area north of the Donbas is classic tank country where the Ukrainians do not have extensive prepared defenses."

The U.S. has provided \$2.5 billion in military aid to Ukraine since 2014, including \$450 million in 2021. That assistance has included some lethal aid, such as antitank Javelin missiles. The Biden administration recently authorized \$200 million in additional defensive aid for Ukraine, but hasn't provided details.

HEADLINE	01/13 Nurses strike protest Covid work conditions
SOURCE	https://www.chicagobusiness.com/health-care/were-overwhelmed-nurses-strike-across-us-protest-covid-working-conditions
GIST	<p>(Bloomberg) — Chicago nurses joined colleagues across the country Thursday to protest against working conditions that they say have rapidly deteriorated as hordes of COVID-19 patients push hospitals to the limit.</p> <p>Scott Mechanic, 36, an emergency room nurse at the University of Chicago Medical Center, said the problems stem from widespread labor shortages throughout the health-care system and hospital leadership who are reluctant to provide assistance.</p> <p>“We don’t have food service people ... we don’t have supply chain people to deliver our most critical supplies, we don’t have people to repair our equipment,” Mechanic said. “But every job that doesn’t get done by somebody else ends up falling to the bedside nurse. We’re overwhelmed.”</p> <p>The protests, organized by National Nurses United, a labor union boasting 175,000 members nationwide, was part of a day of action across 11 U.S. states and Washington, D.C. today “to demand the hospital industry invest in safe staffing, and to demand that President Biden follow through on his campaign promise to protect nurses and prioritize public health,” according to the union. In Chicago, members are still working and the action was part of their bargaining process, but other branches are striking. The union planned to end the day with a candlelight vigil near the White House to honor the thousands of nurses who have died from COVID-19.</p> <p>Biden announced today that his administration would double its order of rapid tests for Americans and would begin distributing “high-quality” masks, which have soared in price, rendering them financially inaccessible to some Americans.</p> <p>The highly transmissible omicron variant is fueling a surge in COVID cases across the country, and now accounts for 98% of all cases, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says. Hospitals have also sounded the alarm about staffing problems, insufficient resources and worsening conditions. Health experts say that while the variant may cause less severe symptoms in people who are vaccinated and otherwise healthy, it’s still extremely dangerous for people who are unvaccinated and may have other conditions. Nearly 63% of people in the United States are fully vaccinated.</p> <p>At the University of Chicago Medical Center where Mechanic works, he said COVID-19 patients are just as sick as they have been throughout the pandemic.</p> <p>“It’s shocking how sick people are,” Mechanic said. “They’re still getting sick and dying of Covid today. That hasn’t changed.”</p> <p>Chicago estimates that 56% of Black residents have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, lagging White and Latino people in the city. The CDC has recorded similar data, reporting that 54% of Black Americans have received one vaccine dose.</p> <p>“At this point, I can’t believe I’m still doing this,” Mechanic said. “I’m still calling (patients’) families and holding the phone to their ear while they gasp for air, knowing it’s likely the last words they’ll speak.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/14 Pharmacies staff shortage; close weekends
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/walgreens-cvs-shut-some-pharmacies-on-weekends-as-omicron-strains-staffing-11642156381
GIST	The biggest U.S. drugstore chains are shutting some pharmacies on weekends as the spread of Covid-19 and the Omicron variant exacerbates already severe staffing shortages.

[CVS Health](#) Corp. and [Walgreens Boots Alliance](#) Inc. said [weekend shutdowns](#) are unusual but become a reality when locations lack enough pharmacists and technicians to remain open.

Supermarkets and U.S. retailers such as [Macy's](#) Inc. and [Walmart](#) Inc. [are also shortening hours](#) as throngs of American [workers stay home](#) because they are sick, awaiting test results or caring for others with the virus.

Before Omicron's spread, the drugstore chains, which collectively operate nearly 20,000 stores nationwide, [were cutting hours](#), raising pay and scrambling to hire tens of thousands more workers to address staffing shortages. But with their roles as major providers of Covid-19 testing and vaccinations, the chains are also dealing with growing discontent among existing staff as well as customers' concern about service.

[Walgreens](#) and CVS said they are unable to quantify weekend closures, which fluctuate each week and sometimes occur without much notice. In places such as Washington, D.C., New Gloucester, Maine, and New Paltz, N.Y., customers have said they unexpectedly encountered closed drive-throughs and pharmacy counters in recent weeks. In some cases, people showed up for scheduled Covid-19 vaccine appointments only to find the pharmacy closed.

Zach Fox, of Akron, Ohio, said his wife went 12 hours without prescribed pain medication after returning home on a recent Friday from surgery to repair a broken leg. He had a prescription sent to the couple's usual CVS, but he arrived that evening to find a sign saying the store had closed at 6 p.m. and wouldn't open until 10 a.m. Monday, "due to circumstances beyond our control."

He went to another CVS, where a pharmacist was unable to provide the pain medication because it is a controlled substance whose prescription can't be transferred between drugstores. Mr. Fox said the pharmacist instructed him to ask his insurer to clear the way for another location to fill the prescription, but the insurer's automated voice system said agents were busy and potentially unavailable until the next day.

"At this point I'm getting angry. My wife has now been twelve hours without her pain meds less than two days after a major surgery," Mr. Fox said. "She's in a lot of pain."

He drove to the hospital where his wife had surgery to request that a doctor clear the way for the prescription to be filled at another CVS, which ultimately worked. "It took a lot of extra work that no one should really have to do to get their medication," he said.

A CVS spokesman said a small fraction of its nearly 10,000 U.S. stores are closing on one or both weekend days "to help address acute staffing issues amidst both the Omicron surge and the workforce shortage affecting nearly every industry and company."

A Walgreens spokeswoman said a vast majority of the chain's 9,000 U.S. stores are open their regular hours. "The ongoing labor shortage, combined with the surge of Covid-19 cases, has resulted in isolated instances in which we've had to adjust operating hours or temporarily close a limited number of stores," she said.

When a pharmacy has to close, Walgreens tries to shut it on days with the lowest demand and then to prepare nearby locations to handle added business, the spokeswoman said. The company tries to alert customers as soon as possible with signage, automated phone calls and adjustments in refills. Employees from closed locations often are deployed to help staff at other stores, she said.

"We're going through this with our communities and remain committed to providing the support needed to get past this surge," she said.

[Rite Aid](#) Corp. last month said it would start closing stores an hour early and allow walk-in vaccines for only an hour a day because of the staffing crunch.

	<p>Demand for Covid-19 vaccines and testing has driven up sales and profits for both CVS and Walgreens. Walgreens recently reported its highest quarterly sales increase in 20 years. CVS this week raised its profit forecast for 2021, largely due to high demand for Covid-19 shots and tests, both at-home and in stores.</p> <p>The added business has also incurred costs. The chains are spending extra to address staff shortages that have led to the sporadic pharmacy closures, chaotic scenes in stores and trouble servicing customers with Covid-19 tests and vaccines.</p> <p>Pharmacists and pharmacy technicians say they are burning out as a result of juggling too many tasks and working long hours and extra shifts. They also are subject to abuse from customers angry over long wait times and scheduling mistakes, the pharmacy staffers say. Walgreens, in a call last week with analysts, attributed scant growth in prescription revenue to pharmacies' limited hours and the reality that pharmacists were too busy to call patients to ensure they were keeping up with their medications.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 Saturday deadline to sign up for Obamacare
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/sign-up-for-obamacare-2022-deadline-health-insurance-marketplace/
GIST	<p>People looking for health insurance in the grip of the Omicron surge have through Saturday to sign up for taxpayer-subsidized private coverage under the Obama-era Affordable Care Act.</p> <p>President Joe Biden's administration is on track to deliver robust enrollment numbers, but those gains could turn into a mirage if congressional Democrats remain stymied on Biden's social agenda package. Biden's coronavirus relief bill has been providing generous subsidy increases that benefit new and returning customers. The juiced-up assistance will go away at the end of this year without further congressional action.</p> <p>"The determining factor in whether this is a lasting gain in enrollment is whether the subsidies are extended," said Cynthia Cox, who follows health insurance trends at the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation. "The biggest threat to enrollment would be if these subsidies expires." Millions of people could see their monthly premiums double and deductibles would also shoot up.</p> <p>Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra said Thursday that about 14.1 million people have enrolled or renewed coverage as of January 8. That's a gain of roughly 2 million covered through HealthCare.gov and state-run insurance marketplaces. Two GOP-led states — Florida and Texas — are seeing particularly strong sign-ups.</p> <p>"Dependable health care coverage is in reach at affordable rates," said Chiquita Brooks-LaSure, head of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, which runs the program. Because of the Obama health law, or ACA, people cannot be turned down for coverage due to medical problems.</p> <p>In addition to improved subsidies, the Biden administration has also focused more energy on outreach, increasing the number of enrollment counselors and stepping up advertising.</p> <p>"It's mostly good news for the administration," said Cox.</p> <p>About 9 in 10 U.S. residents currently have health insurance through a mix of employer, public and individual plans, but 28 million people remain uninsured even with the COVID-19 pandemic in its third year. Most uninsured people would be eligible for taxpayer-subsidized coverage, and surveys show many are just not aware of that.</p> <p>People who sign up by Saturday will have coverage effective February 1.</p> <p>After January 15, people still looking for coverage will need a specific reason, such as losing a job or a change in family circumstances, to qualify for a special enrollment period.</p>

	Federal officials recommend that deadline day procrastinators enroll by midnight local time in their community.
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HEADLINE	01/14 Mask rules tighten in Europe: winter surge
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/masks-rules-tighter-europe-winters-covid-19-wave-82261046
GIST	<p>ROME -- To mask or not to mask is a question Italy settled early in the COVID-19 outbreak with a vigorous "yes." Now the onetime epicenter of the pandemic in Europe hopes even stricter mask rules will help it beat the latest infection surge.</p> <p>Other countries are taking similar action as the more transmissible — yet, apparently, less virulent — omicron variant spreads through the continent.</p> <p>With intensive care units in Italy's hospitals rapidly filling with mostly unvaccinated COVID-19 patients, the government announced on Christmas Eve that FFP2 masks — which offer users more protection than cloth or surgical masks — must be worn on public transport, including planes, trains, ferries and subways.</p> <p>That's even though all passengers in Italy, as of this week, must be vaccinated or recently recovered from COVID-19. FFP2s also must now be worn at theaters, cinemas and sports events, indoors or out, and can't be removed even for their wearers to eat or drink.</p> <p>Italy reintroduced an outdoor mask mandate. It had never lifted its indoor mandate — even when infections sharply dropped in the summer.</p> <p>On a chilly morning in Rome this week, Lillo D'Amico, 84, sported a wool cap and white FFP2 as he bought a newspaper at his neighborhood newsstand.</p> <p>"(Masks) cost little money, they cost you a small sacrifice," he said. "When you do the math, it costs far less than hospitalization."</p> <p>When he sees someone from the unmasked minority walking by, he keeps a distance. "They see (masks) as an affront to their freedom," D'Amico said, shrugging.</p> <p>Spain reinstated its outdoor mask rule on Christmas Eve. After the 14-day contagion rate soared to 2,722 new infections per 100,000 people by the end of last week — from 40 per 100,000 in mid-October — Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez was asked whether the outdoor mask mandate was helping.</p> <p>"Of course, it is. It's not me saying it. It's science itself saying it because (it's) a virus that is contracted when one exhales," Sanchez said.</p> <p>Portugal brought masks back at the end of November, after having largely dropped the requirement when it hit its goal of vaccinating 86% of the population.</p> <p>Greece has also restored its outdoor mask mandate, while requiring an FFP2 or double surgical mask on public transport and in indoor public spaces.</p> <p>This week, the Dutch government's outbreak management team recommended a mask mandate for people over age 13 in busy public indoor areas such as restaurants, museums and theaters, and for spectators at indoor sports events. Those places are currently closed under a lockdown until at least Jan. 14.</p> <p>In France, the outdoor mask mandate was partially reinstated in December in many cities, including Paris. The age for children to start wearing masks in public places was lowered to 6 from 11.</p>

Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer announced last week that people must wear FFP2 masks outdoors if they can't keep at least two meters (6.5 feet) apart.

In Italy, with more than 2 million people currently positive for the virus in a nation of 60 million and workplace absences curtailing train and bus runs, the government also sees masks as a way to let society more fully function.

People with booster shots or recent second vaccine doses can now avoid quarantine after coming into contact with an infected person if they wear a FFP2 mask for 10 days.

The government has ordered shops to make FFP masks available for 75 euro cents (\$0.85). In the pandemic's first year, FFP2s cost up to 10 euros (\$11.50) — whenever they could be found.

Italians wear them in a palette of colors. The father of a baby baptized this week by Pope Francis in the Sistine Chapel wore one in burgundy, with matching tie and jacket pocket square. But the pontiff, who has practically shunned a mask in public, didn't wear one.

On Monday, Vatican City State mandated FFP2s in all indoor places. The tiny, walled independent state across the Tiber from the heart of Rome also stipulated that Vatican employees can go to work without quarantining after coming into contact with someone testing positive if, in addition to being fully vaccinated or having received a booster shot, they wear FFP2s.

Francis did appear to be wearing a FFP2 when, startling shoppers in Rome on Tuesday evening, he emerged from a music store near the Pantheon before being driven back to the Vatican.

In Britain, where Prime Minister Boris Johnson has focused on vaccination, masks have never been required outdoors.

This month, though, the government said secondary school students should wear face coverings in class. But Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi said that rule wouldn't apply "for a day longer than necessary."

When the British government lifted pandemic restrictions in July 2021, turning mask-wearing from a requirement to a suggestion, mask use fell markedly.

Nino Cartabellotta, president of the Bologna-based GIMBE foundation, which monitors health care in Italy, says Britain points to what can happen when measures like mask-wearing aren't valued.

"The situation in the U.K. showed that use of vaccination alone wasn't enough" to get ahead of the pandemic, even though Britain was one of the first countries to begin vaccination, he said in a video interview.

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HEADLINE	01/14 India: tens of thousands at Hindu festival
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/thousands-gather-hindu-festival-india-virus-surges-82261346
GIST	<p>LUCKNOW, India -- Tens of thousands of devout Hindus, led by heads of monasteries and ash-smeared ascetics, took a holy dip into the frigid waters of the Ganges River in northern India on Friday despite rising COVID-19 infections in the country.</p> <p>Hindu pilgrims congregated at the Sangam, the confluence of three rivers — the Ganges, the Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati — in Prayagraj city, 200 km (124 miles) northeast of Lucknow, the state capital of Uttar Pradesh, to participate in the Magh Mela festival, one of the most sacred pilgrimages in Hinduism. They bathed in the Ganges waters, a ritual Hindus believe will wash away their sins and free them from the cycle of death and rebirth.</p>

A similar gathering at a Hindu festival last year in the Himalayan town of Haridwar, in neighboring Uttarakhand state, helped spread the delta variant that ravaged the country and made India one of the world's worst-hit countries. Epidemiologists described the festival as a "superspreader event."

Coronavirus infections, fueled by the omicron variant, are rising fast throughout India. The country reported over 264,000 new infections on Friday but hospitalizations remain relatively low.

Millions of Hindus are expected to throng the festival for the next 47 days. Many of them will stay on the banks of the Ganges for a month leading the life of an ascetic, with the belief they will receive salvation. It has raised concerns that pilgrims could get infected and take the virus back to their cities and villages in other parts of the country.

Already, 77 policemen and 12 cleaning staff deployed for the event have tested positive for the virus.

"This is going to be a superspreader. The government should not allow a congregation of people in such a large number because religious congregations in the past two years were found responsible for spreading the deadly virus all across the country," said Utkarsh Mishra, a lawyer who has filed a petition in the Allahabad High Court asking that the festival be canceled.

Mishra said only locals and heads of important Hindu monasteries should be allowed to take part in the ritual.

Fearing a rise in infections, authorities in neighboring Uttarakhand state have already banned a similar gathering.

Health experts earlier appealed for the festival to be canceled in Uttar Pradesh state too, but the government went ahead saying safety rules would be followed.

Shesh Mani Pandey, a senior official in charge of the event, said only those who have taken two doses of the COVID-19 vaccines and have vaccination certificates would be allowed to join the ritualistic bathing. He said pilgrims will be allowed to enter the festival site after going through thermal scanning at the entry gates.

Critics of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party say the festival has been allowed despite rising infections because the government isn't willing to anger Hindus — they are the party's biggest supporters — ahead of crucial state elections in Uttar Pradesh.

The BJP-ruled state is holding polls on Feb. 10.

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HEADLINE	01/13 Covid vaccine breakthrough cases on rise
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article257292742.html
GIST	<p>COVID-19 vaccine breakthrough cases have increased in Washington state, the Department of Health says, but vaccines continue to provide protection.</p> <p>Breakthrough cases recently increased 43%, according to a Thursday news release. The state counts a breakthrough case if a person tests positive for COVID-19 via a PCR or antigen test and has received their final vaccine dose over two weeks prior.</p> <p>The state believes the increase is related to the record-breaking surge in disease activity across the state.</p> <p>The more transmissible Omicron virus variant has come to dominate the recent wave in infections after first being detected in early December. Since then, cases have skyrocketed and local hospitals have been strained.</p>

“That’s why, to avoid worsening the strain on our hospitals, everyone should use a high-quality well-fitting mask, don’t use the emergency department unless it’s a true emergency, and, most important, get vaccinated and boosted as soon as you are eligible,” DOH Chief Health Officer Tao Sheng Kwan-Gett said in a news release.

The newer variant appears to evade vaccine immunity to a greater extent than previous variants, Kwan-Gett said in the release, but vaccines and boosters still effectively lower the risk of hospitalization and death.

“Even without a booster dose, those who are vaccinated are less likely to become very ill and need hospitalization, and a booster dose decreases the risk even more.” Kwan-Gett said.

A DOH report suggest the increase in breakthrough cases may be due to the spread of the Omicron variant, increasing numbers of vaccinated persons, possible waning immunity and changes in mitigation recommendations for the public.

From Jan. 17, 2021, to Jan. 1, 2022, the state identified 123,365 breakthrough cases. Of that total, the report indicates about 3% of the patients were hospitalized and 38% were not. The report notes the status of the remaining 59% was unknown.

The report says 8% experienced no symptoms and 38% experienced some symptoms. The symptoms of the remaining 54% was unknown.

Even with a large portion of the data being unknown, the DOH release indicates most individuals with confirmed vaccine breakthrough cases “experienced only mild or no symptoms.”

People ages 20-34 and 35-49 each made up 28% of breakthrough cases. Meanwhile, those 19 and younger accounted for 9%, those 50-64 made up 21%, those 65-79 made up 11% and those 80 and older made up just 3%.

Notably, women made up 53% of breakthrough cases while men made up 45%, per the report. The sex of the remaining 2% was unknown.

A higher percentage of women have gotten vaccinated than men, according to the DOH, so more women are at risk of breakthrough cases than men.

Over the same period, 919 people died due to COVID-19-related illness after experiencing a breakthrough case. The dead ranged in ages from 31 to 103, per the report, but the median age was 79.

Breakthrough cases represent around 2.5% of the over 4.5 million vaccinated population in Washington state, per the release.

In Thurston County, the state reports 67.5% (12,311) of cases affected unvaccinated individuals and 23.8% (5,106) of cases affected vaccinated individuals from February to December 2021.

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HEADLINE	01/13 Gov. deploys National Guard to hospitals
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3310818/gov-inslee-deploys-national-guard-hospital-staffing-crisis/
GIST	<p>Gov. Jay Inslee announced Thursday that he will be deploying the National Guard to hospitals across Washington, while halting all non-emergency procedures to free up medical staff.</p> <p>This comes in the wake of ongoing warnings from the Washington State Hospital Association (WSHA), who said this week that they are experiencing “a crisis” driven by rising COVID-19 cases and significant staffing shortages.</p>

To help mitigate that, Inslee is mobilizing 100 Washington National Guardsmen spread across hospital emergency departments “to assist with various non-medical tasks to alleviate the crowded and chaotic situation.” Those personnel will be divided among four hospitals in Everett, Yakima, Wenatchee, and Spokane.

The National Guard will be deployed to hospitals in Olympia, Richland, Seattle, and Tacoma as well to assist with COVID-19 testing efforts, with additional FEMA-run test sites to be set up in King and Snohomish counties.

Hospital staffing

Gov. Inslee is mandating that hospitals “temporarily halt non-urgent procedures” for the next four weeks to allow health care workers the ability to divert their focus to growing needs in emergency departments.

Concurrently, he is investing \$30 million of his supplemental budget “to allow nurses, nursing assistants, and medical assistants to achieve their educational and clinical requirements without facing delays caused by limited opportunities for training.” Retired health care workers are also being asked to return “temporarily.”

“The governor is asking for anyone who can help out – with testing, vaccinating, working in the hospital or other locations – to please help,” his office said in a written release.

Hospitals have been forced to make up for low staffing by relaxing their return-to-work restrictions for workers with COVID-19. KTTH’s Jason Rantz and KIRO Newsradio [reported this week](#) that a handful of MultiCare hospitals have ordered symptomatic, COVID-positive staff to work “if they are experiencing mild symptoms but are improving.”

Other hospitals have adopted similar policies as well.

“Staff exposed to COVID-19 or who may have been previously infected may return to work sooner than normal,” WSHA Vice President Taya Briley confirmed during a Thursday briefing.

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HEADLINE	01/13 CDC cruise rules expire; voluntary program
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2022/01/13/cdc-cruise-rules-expire-omicron/
GIST	<p>Cruise lines that sail in the United States will soon be allowed to decide if they want to follow pandemic-era guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>The “conditional sailing order,” a mandatory set of rules that cruise companies have had to follow since 2020, expires on Saturday. After that, the agency will transition to a “voluntary COVID-19 risk mitigation program” for ships that are registered in foreign countries and operate in U.S. waters.</p> <p>These rules have included requiring vaccination for a certain percentage of passengers and crew; tests before boarding for passengers and regular testing for crew; and mask-wearing indoors unless eating or drinking.</p> <p>The shift to a voluntary program comes after the CDC raised its health notice level for cruise ships, warning all travelers to avoid cruising as the omicron variant sent case numbers skyrocketing. According to the agency, cruise ships reported 14,803 coronavirus cases between Dec. 30 and Jan. 12. That’s 95 times the number of cases reported — 155 — between Dec. 1 and 14.</p> <p>Even operators that don’t opt to follow the recommendations will be under the CDC’s authority in important ways, said Aimee Treffiletti, a captain in the U.S. Public Health Service and lead for the agency’s maritime unit. They will have to report coronavirus cases and be subject to the public transportation mask mandate that has been extended into March. The CDC will be able to conduct investigations into outbreaks and issue a no-sail order for specific ships.</p>

Despite the recent spike in cases on cruises, the CDC is still not seeing severe outcomes on ships — which Treffiletti attributed to the coronavirus mitigation measures that cruise lines are following.

“Things like hospitalization, ventilator use, medical evacuations and deaths are not a major issue on board,” she said.

The CDC originally announced in late October that the cruise rules would become voluntary, before the omicron variant emerged.

Under the new voluntary program, the agency will continue to recommend the same measures that have been in place. Cruise lines have until Jan. 21 to opt in; those that participate will need to follow all of the recommendations, not just some of them.

The CDC said its maritime unit will work closely with ships that take part in the voluntary program, monitoring their coronavirus measures and cases. The ships that opt in will continue to appear on the CDC’s [chart](#) of foreign-flagged ships sailing in U.S. waters. Those vessels are assigned a color based on whether coronavirus cases have been reported in the past seven days.

“It’s really about transparency with the cruising public,” Treffiletti said. “They’ll be able to say that they’re in constant communication with the CDC, they’re reporting covid cases as well as other respiratory disease to the CDC on a daily basis, they’re following all the public health protocols and mitigation strategies to control the spread.”

Those that don’t participate will be marked as gray, meaning the CDC has not reviewed nor confirmed their health and safety procedures. Treffiletti said passengers should know that “there will be many unknowns” about what mitigation measures and protocols are being followed on those ships.

The Cruise Lines International Association pointed out that cruise companies operating in Florida have already been voluntarily [following](#) the conditional sailing order since this past summer, when a judge ruled it should be considered a nonbinding recommendation.

In a statement, the industry group said the CDC’s move to a voluntary program “recognizes the cruise industry’s unwavering commitment to providing some of the highest levels of COVID-19 mitigation found in any industry.”

“CLIA ocean-going cruise line members will continue to be guided by the science and the principle of putting people first, with proven measures that are adapted as conditions warrant to protect the health of cruise passengers, crewmembers, and destinations,” the statement said.

The shift away from mandatory requirements drew criticism from some in Congress.

Rep. Doris Matsui (D-Calif.) and Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) criticized the CDC’s decision to switch to a voluntary program on Thursday, urging the agency to extend the order and enforce it strictly, and calling on the industry to improve transparency and conditions for passengers who test positive on cruises.

“While the world battles the highest surge in COVID-19 cases to date, prioritizing and strongly enforcing measures that maximize the safety of all those on board cruise ships is critical,” they wrote in a [letter](#) to CDC Director Rochelle Walensky. “Prematurely transitioning to a voluntary program could allow companies to skirt necessary public health measures.”

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HEADLINE	01/13 Safely reuse KN95, N95 mask?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2022/01/13/kn95-n95-mask-reuse-omicron/

Surging [coronavirus](#) cases in the United States, driven by the highly contagious omicron variant, have prompted [renewed recommendations](#) from health experts that the public should consider wearing more protective face coverings, such as N95 or KN95 masks.

President Biden [also said his administration](#) is working on making such higher-quality masks more widely available.

“Next week, we’ll announce how we are making high-quality masks available to the American people for free,” Biden said Thursday. “I know we all wish that we could finally be done with wearing masks. I get it. But they are a really important tool to stop the spread, especially of the highly transmittable omicron variant.”

The administration noted this week that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention “[recommends Americans](#) wear a well-fitting mask.” Biden acknowledged Thursday that “for some Americans, the mask is not always affordable or convenient to get.”

Health experts say while there are no hard and fast rules, there are best practices for safely getting multiple uses out of N95s or KN95s.

How many times can I reuse my mask?

“In the ideal world — or pre-pandemic — many masks were really viewed as single-use,” said Michael G. Knight, an assistant professor of medicine at George Washington University. “The reality is they do have a little bit more length in the amount of time we can use them.”

What’s crucial, Knight said, is making sure the mask has “maintained its integrity.” Think about how many times you’ve used it and for how long, he said.

“If I’m just putting a mask on to go to the grocery store for 45 minutes and I’m taking it off, that mask very well should be able to last me a couple of days,” he said.

But if you’re wearing a mask all day, such as during a long work shift where you may be sweating and talking all day to the point the mask becomes soiled, “then that may not be a mask that I can reuse.”

“If I’m wearing it for three hours, I’m going for a workout and I’m sweating, then that mask is most likely going to be soiled,” Knight said.

When you start seeing signs that the mask is soiled, “you’re getting to the point that that mask needs to be replaced,” he added.

Even with normal use, if you wear a mask for a few hours a day, “within four or five days, it’s going to be visibly soiled,” Knight said.

The CDC website notes that it recommends using N95 respirators for [no more than five uses](#).

What are some best practices for safely reusing my mask?

Some experts suggest having a few masks on hand so you can rotate between them. That way, after wearing one mask, you can set it aside for a few days before picking it up again, said Richard M. Carpiano, a public health scientist and sociologist at the University of California in Riverside.

That would allow “enough time for any sort of virus particulates or virus remnants to die off,” he said.

The reason to have a rest period between uses is to let the mask dry out and to give time for any viral particles the mask may have filtered to deactivate, Knight added. He recommended resting your mask for 24 to 48 hours.

But don't keep the masks in rotation indefinitely. After a few wearings, "you want to move on to a fresh one," Carpiano said.

Knight [has stressed](#) that people should wash and sanitize their hands after taking off a mask and recommended removing the mask from the ear loops or elastic bands to avoid touching the outside of the mask that may be contaminated.

Where should I store masks between uses?

The key is to keep the masks somewhere where they can air out, said Christopher Sulmonte, project administrator for the Johns Hopkins biocontainment unit.

"There's going to be a little amount of moisture on the mask itself — that's just naturally what happens when you wear it," he said. "Having a space that you're able to dry it out is important."

Sulmonte recommended placing the masks in a paper bag, because it's a clean place to keep the mask and it's "contained enough that you can still have the process of letting it dry out."

Knight recommended a mesh bag as another option, placing it "somewhere that air is flowing."

Storing your mask in a clean place where it can dry out will prevent it from being exposed to contaminants between uses and will prolong its effectiveness, experts say.

How do I know when it's time to throw out my mask?

Examine your mask and determine whether it's safe to use based on two main factors, Knight said: the mask's condition and fit.

If the mask has a cut or tear, it's no longer usable, Knight said.

The mask should also no longer be used if it's "severely soiled," he added.

If someone was sneezing while wearing the mask and "mucus has now infiltrated the mask, that mask is soiled and they can't be used anymore."

There's also a difference, Knight said, between a mask that has moisture from normal use or one that has been "saturated."

"If you have a mask on and you're talking, there are microdroplets, because our breath has moisture," he said. "So of course, there's going to be some low levels of moisture."

That's why it helps to air out the mask between uses.

"But if the mask is saturated from some fluids, that's a different story," he said, perhaps from saliva or maybe you were caught in the rain and the mask is soaked with water.

Then it's time for a new one.

A mask that is saturated is compromised, Knight [has told The Post](#).

Experts note that KN95s and N95s — unlike the cloth variety — cannot be effectively sanitized by standard washing.

The fit is also crucial.

When you notice the mask no longer seals well around your nose and around your face, "maybe the nose band is not as flexible and you're noticing there's a gap ... that's the time you want to discard that," Carpiano said.

For N95s specifically, experts underlined those are most effective when they are fit-tested, because they need to press tightly against your face and form a seal.

Over time, the elastic keeping the mask in place can stretch.

“If that fit is no longer tight and no longer forming a seal, then that mask is no longer as effective in filtering the air you’re breathing,” Knight said about the N95s.

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HEADLINE	01/13 Study: nearly all teens in ICU unvaccinated
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2022/01/13/teens-icu-unvaccinated/
GIST	<p>Nearly all teenagers needing intensive care for covid-19 were unvaccinated in a study of more than 1,000 hospital patients in the United States.</p> <p>The Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine prevented 94 percent of hospitalizations and was 98 percent effective at keeping patients out of intensive care (ICU) or from requiring life support, per the peer-reviewed analysis published Wednesday in the New England Journal of Medicine.</p> <p>As pediatric hospitalizations surge in many parts of the United States, fueled by the more transmissible omicron variant, the study’s findings help illustrate how vaccination can protect young people from severe complications and death.</p> <p>“Nearly all hospitalizations and deaths in this population could have been prevented by vaccination,” writes Kathryn M. Edwards, scientific director of the Vanderbilt Vaccine Research Program, in an editorial to the journal about the study, which was conducted by experts from pediatric hospitals in collaboration with researchers from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>About 36 percent of children between 12 and 17 have not received any dose of a vaccine, according to the CDC. That’s months after the Food and Drug Administration authorized the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine in May for those between 12 and 15. The CDC has since also recommended that children between 12 and 17 get a booster dose.</p> <p>And although it remains true that children who contract the coronavirus are far less likely than adults to get seriously sick or die of it, public health officials have encouraged children ages 5 and older to get vaccinated.</p> <p>The study examined data from 1,222 patients between 12 and 18 years old who were hospitalized between June 1 and Oct. 25, 2021, in one of 31 hospitals across the United States taking part in the Overcoming Covid-19 study, a research collaboration between pediatric hospitals and the CDC. The study included 445 teens who were hospitalized for covid-19 and 777 who were hospitalized for other reasons.</p> <p>Of the 1,222 patients, 299 were fully vaccinated — a number Vanderbilt’s Edwards called “distressing” in her editorial.</p> <p>“Although these rates have increased somewhat since the data in this study were compiled, as of December 1, 2021, only 60% of U.S. adolescents had received a single dose of a Covid-19 vaccine, and only 50% had been fully vaccinated,” she writes. “Vigorous efforts must be expended to improve vaccination coverage among all children and especially among those at highest risk for severe covid-19.”</p> <p>Forty percent of the patients with a positive coronavirus test result were admitted to the ICU. All but two were unvaccinated. And all but one of those who required life-supporting interventions, such as being put on a ventilator, were unvaccinated.</p>

	<p>The hospitals included in the study were in cities, and more than half of the patients with covid were hospitalized in Southern states, where the delta variant of the coronavirus was spreading especially quickly during the study period.</p> <p>Even with those limitations, the study is particularly valuable, because its subjects are more diverse and in poorer health than those who are typically enrolled in the kinds of trials that pave the way for authorizing new treatments like the coronavirus vaccines, notes Manish M. Patel, one of the study authors and a member of the CDC's covid-19 Response Team. It shows that the vaccines are effective at preventing severe covid-19 even in the most vulnerable young people.</p> <p>"It really takes the introduction of a vaccine in the real world to understand whether the vaccines work in the real world," Patel adds.</p> <p>About a quarter of the patients in the study were Black, and a quarter were Hispanic. About three-fourths of the teens in hospital in both the control and the case groups had at least one preexisting condition, including obesity, diabetes or asthma. And the patients with a positive coronavirus test were more likely to live in areas deemed more "socially vulnerable" than their peers in the control groups.</p> <p>"When you see something work that well in such a sick population ... that's very reassuring that it's definitely been working much better in the general population," Patel said of the vaccine, "although you can't get much higher than 94 percent."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 Russia ratchets up pressure on Europe
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/13/europe-osce-russia-ukraine/
GIST	<p>The United States and its European allies appeared no closer to resolving a crisis with Russia over a possible renewed war in Ukraine, as Western officials flatly rejected Moscow's call to pledge there would be no further eastward expansion of NATO, while a top Russian negotiator said diplomacy already had reached a "dead end."</p> <p>The impasse came after three rounds of high-stakes talks this week in Geneva, Brussels and Vienna, where the United States hoped to placate Russia by proposing reciprocal restraints on missile placements and military exercises in Europe. The Russian delegation expressed interest in those areas but still accused Washington and its allies of stonewalling on the Kremlin's core demands.</p> <p>This week's flurry of meetings was seen as a critical bid to defuse a crisis amid fears that Russia — which has amassed more than 100,000 forces near its western border — could once again invade Ukraine, the neighboring nation where Russia has been fueling a separatist conflict for nearly eight years.</p> <p>Ukraine is seeking NATO membership and deepening military and economic ties with the West, but the country is seen by Moscow as part of its sphere of influence, with Russian President Vladimir Putin last year asserting that "true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia."</p> <p>Massing troops near Ukraine as leverage, Putin has demanded sweeping security guarantees from the United States and NATO, including a halt to any NATO expansion, a rollback of the alliance's infrastructure and weaponry to its 1997 boundaries — which would remove any military presence in Poland and the Baltic States, among other countries — and a ban on offensive strike weapons near Russia's borders.</p> <p>The Russian stance would fundamentally reshape European security and reflects Putin's attempt to rework the fallout of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which left Russia weakened as NATO expanded. U.S. officials have called his demands regarding NATO non-starters.</p> <p>In a rapid-fire series of statements from Kremlin and Foreign Ministry officials on Thursday, Russia gave a categoric thumbs down to the Western effort this week to ease tensions.</p>

In quick succession, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Alexander Lukashevich, Russia's ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), all condemned the refusal of the United States and NATO to accept Russia's demands.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said Thursday there were "no grounds" to continue the security talks — a rebuff to the West that amped up the pressure on the Biden administration and sent the ruble and the Russian stock market tumbling amid fears of a renewed war.

Ryabkov said the United States and its allies have rejected Moscow's key demands and have offered to negotiate only on topics of secondary interest to Russia.

"There is, to a certain extent, a dead end or a difference in approaches," he said in a Russian television interview. Without some sign of flexibility from the United States, he said, "I do not see reasons to sit down in the coming days, to gather again and start these same discussions."

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan, in a briefing Thursday, said top Russian officials "over the course of the week have given both hopeful signs and deeply pessimistic signs," and noted that the United States remained prepared for any contingency.

If the Kremlin proceeds with an invasion, Sullivan said, Russia would face significant financial sanctions and export controls targeting its strategic industries, and Washington would "dramatically ramp up" military aid to Ukraine in addition to bolstering its NATO allies with new forces and materiel — all contrary to what Putin wants.

Sullivan also warned that Russia is laying the groundwork for sabotage and information operations to fabricate a false pretext for invading Ukraine, and said the U.S. government would release more information about those activities in the next 24 hours.

His comments came after the OSCE convened its permanent council in Vienna, where the head of the American delegation, U.S. Ambassador Michael Carpenter, called on member states to "decisively reject blackmail and never allow aggression and threats to be rewarded."

In a briefing after the Vienna meeting, Carpenter said he expected follow-on talks in the coming weeks about European security under the OSCE, but noted that "the drumbeat of war is sounding rather loud and the rhetoric is rather shrill." He said the United States would be happy to discuss transparency about military exercises and other matters but wouldn't be budging on sacrosanct principles that underpin the international system.

"We're not going to entertain spheres of influence. We're not going to restrict sovereign states' rights to choose their alliances. And we're not going to privilege one state's security over that of another," Carpenter said.

The final decision on any further dialogue with the West — and whether the crisis leads to a renewed war — rests with Putin.

Lavrov, who described the Western position as "arrogant, unyielding and uncompromising," said Thursday that Putin would decide on further action after receiving written responses to Moscow's demands next week. It wasn't immediately clear, however, if U.S. officials were preparing a written response to the two draft treaties Russia made public last month.

Putin has threatened to take unspecified "military-technical" measures if NATO does not accede to his demands.

	<p>U.S. officials have countered that it is Russia that has invaded two neighboring nations — Ukraine and Georgia — and annexed Crimea from Ukraine, as well as using chemical weapons in attempted assassinations in Europe, posing a threat to the continent.</p> <p>Throughout the talks this week, Russian officials denied plans to attack Ukraine and rebuffed NATO calls to de-escalate, saying Russia has a right to move troops and forces on its own territory.</p> <p>U.S. intelligence analysis has found that the Russian military is preparing for a multipronged offensive against Ukraine that could include as many as 175,000 forces and take place this winter.</p> <p>In his television interview, Ryabkov also refused to rule out sending Russian military infrastructure to Cuba or Venezuela if tensions with Washington continued to rise.</p> <p>In addition to calling the talks unsuccessful, Peskov, the Kremlin spokesman, on Thursday highlighted a bill announced the day before by Democratic senators for tough new sanctions against Russians, including Putin, if there is military action against Ukraine.</p> <p>Peskov called it “extremely negative.” Sanctioning a head of state, he said, “is an outrageous measure that is comparable to breaking off relations.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 Schools facing dire staff shortages
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/01/13/schools-parents-substitutes-omicron-shortage/
GIST	<p>Some schools desperate for substitute teachers and other staff are turning to an unusual group of candidates: parents.</p> <p>At Austin Jewish Academy, Principal Chris Aguero said he is relying exclusively on parents to fill in as teachers call out sick during the latest surge in coronavirus cases and as the pool of substitutes dries up.</p> <p>“It’s people reprioritizing what they want to do with their time,” Aguero said. “So if they’re not afraid to be in a building full of children, then they have to decide, is this how they want to spend their time?”</p> <p>The Texas school isn’t alone.</p> <p>At Hays Consolidated Independent School District, just south of Austin, parents are now considered qualified to fill in for absent teachers without the 30 college hours usually required, district spokesman Tim Savoy said in a statement. A flier posted on the district’s Facebook page says its schools are hiring “certified and eligible noncertified” substitute teachers.</p> <p>In the Dallas metro area, Richardson Independent School District called on parents Wednesday to help it overcome “immediate and critical shortages” of staff by volunteering to work as cafeteria monitors, central office assistants or substitute teachers. And in Palo Alto, Calif., the district’s superintendent filmed a video begging for volunteers so that schools could stay open.</p> <p>The pleas for help reflect a nationwide staffing crisis as districts grapple with teacher shortages — partly fueled by departures related to the coronavirus pandemic — and an increasing number of employees needing to stay home after being infected with or exposed to the highly contagious omicron variant. As districts struggle to find substitutes, many teachers have been skipping their planning periods to cover their colleagues’ classes.</p> <p>The shortages also extend beyond teachers. In Maryland, Montgomery County Public Schools has asked for National Guard members to serve as bus drivers. School board members in a Vermont district helped clean buildings after the custodial staff lost about one-third of its members. A Georgia principal has been serving chicken nuggets to students and washing dishes.</p>

Still, a majority of U.S. schools have operated mostly as planned during the omicron surge. About 4 percent of schools [experienced a pandemic-related disruption](#) — unplanned virtual learning, independent learning or closures — this week, according to the data-tracking company Burbio.

Texas schools have a particular incentive to keep classroom learning available to students. To maintain full state funding, the Texas Education Agency [requires schools to provide an in-person option](#) for any family that wants it.

Savoy said Hays CISD, which serves more than 20,000 students, has been scrambling to find enough substitute teachers to meet its need. The district, he said, has fewer substitutes than usual — about 300, compared with roughly 500 in a non-pandemic year — and more teachers needing to stay home — at least 250 each day of the week after this year’s winter break, compared with about 180 in most years.

As of Thursday, Savoy said three parents had signed up to be substitutes and Hays had yet to cancel a class. District employees, including central office staff and other teachers, also were serving as substitutes, he said.

At Austin Jewish Academy, seven parents have agreed to work as substitutes in the 130-student school, Aguero said. They have to take a short training and be vaccinated against the coronavirus, and they are paid the same amount as other substitute teachers.

Unlike Hays CISD, Austin Jewish Academy hasn’t changed its requirements. Even in normal times, the school does not expect substitutes to have a college education or any kind of certification.

The key, Aguero said, is simply whether someone seems well-suited to work with children and keep order in a classroom. It also helps, he said, that parents generally take the pandemic precautions that the school expects.

“You could have the most credentialed person who can’t command a classroom, and they wouldn’t be a good fit,” Aguero said.

Don Austin, superintendent of Palo Alto Unified School District in the San Francisco Bay area, said in his video that the district needed parents to help with staffing for schools to stay open.

“We can’t keep up. There’s no labor pool,” Austin told parents. “No amount of money can solve this issue. We need your help.”

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HEADLINE	01/13 Major storm to wallop central, east Lower 48
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2022/01/13/winter-storm-east-coast-snow/
GIST	<p>A significant winter storm is set to unleash an array of snow, sleet and ice across much of the central and eastern Lower 48 this weekend. Major travel disruptions and hefty accumulations of wintry precipitation are likely, as the storm is expected to slip through the Upper Midwest, Mid-South and Eastern Seaboard to punctuate Martin Luther King Jr. Day weekend.</p> <p>The National Weather Service is already noting that the winter storm could have an “extreme” impact for some. The storm will deliver its wintry wallop in a three-act performance that could impact as many as 75 million Americans.</p> <p>While the storm has yet to develop, it has been the subject of considerable forecast uncertainty for days. Weather models have been waffling in their simulations, resulting in doubts about precipitation type and totals along the Interstate 95 corridor.</p> <p>Fortunately for forecasters, the instigating ingredients that will spur the system’s growth were in the process of moving ashore in the Pacific Northwest on Thursday morning, allowing them to be “sampled”</p>

by weather balloons. That will yield a better availability of data that can be used to help fine-tune computer model output.

The storm now

While the storm had not yet materialized as of Thursday morning, its precursors were already bringing active weather to parts of Washington state and Oregon. A shortwave trough, or lobe of cold air, low pressure and spin nestled within a dip in the jet stream, was cruising ashore, with dry air in its wake spelling an end to days of rainfall from a stubborn “atmospheric river.”

The mid-level low-pressure system will begin to acquire a negative tilt — or a slant resembling a backslash — that will give it more of a kick. That will help it energize a surface disturbance early Friday, ejecting east of the Rockies out of Montana onto the High Plains. High pressure over Manitoba and Ontario will reinforce an uninterrupted supply of cold air over the north-central United States, setting the stage for snow.

Plains and Upper Midwest

The low will tug north a ribbon of moisture that will “overrun” up and over a lip of cold, dense air near the surface. That will deposit a strip of snow from central North Dakota southeast over the Lake Traverse Reservation of northeastern South Dakota and the James River Valley. Southwestern Minnesota and most of Iowa will see moderate to major accumulations, too, as the snow continues over the Corn Belt. Sioux Falls, S.D., and Des Moines could be in the jackpot zone.

The key time frame to watch will be from sunrise Friday near the Canadian border to early Saturday along the Interstate 80 corridor of southern Iowa.

Winter storm watches and warnings have been hoisted in the narrow zone of real estate likely to pick up a good thump of snow, with a widespread 6 to 10 inches and localized one-foot totals slated to fall. Only watches were in effect over most of Iowa on Thursday morning, since warnings usually aren’t issued more than about 36 hours before an event.

Unlike in a number of recent events, strong winds aren’t expected to coincide with the falling snow, leaving blizzard conditions out of the question. High-wind warnings are in effect, however, across western South Dakota from roughly the Missouri River to the Black Hills, where gusts topping 55 mph are possible as a frigid air mass builds in behind the system on Friday night.

The snow will continue Saturday into northeastern and north-central Missouri, primarily well north of Interstate 70 and east of Interstate 35, although Kansas City could pick up several inches of snow Friday night into Saturday morning.

Ozarks, Tennessee Valley and Mid-South

From there, uncertainty increases. Forecasters are confident the storm will take a left, or eastward, turn as it approaches Arkansas and shifts toward the Tennessee Valley, but we still have yet to iron out exactly where that inflection in path takes place. That will have a bearing on who ends up on the warm side of the nascent storm system and who is thrust into the chilly air north of the low-pressure center. That, in turn, will determine precipitation type and amounts.

In cities such as Memphis and Nashville, the potential exists for a couple of inches of snow, with a low-end risk of a plowable snow. Northern parts of Middle Tennessee and the Cumberland Plateau will probably see more-appreciable totals, as will most of Kentucky.

There will be a sharp southern cutoff to the snow, so while places like Tupelo, Miss., Huntsville, Ala., and Atlanta could see a few flakes on Saturday night, the propensity for anything more appears rather limited.

Appalachians and East Coast

This is where the forecast continues to remain hazy. What transpires across the East Coast is predicated on the exact track of the system. Right now there are a couple of possibilities:

- **Least likely:** an offshore track that would swirl cold air down across the Eastern Seaboard. That would reduce the amount of moisture present for snow but maintain cold-enough temperatures to keep it a predominantly snow event. This appears improbable right now.
- **Most likely:** an “inside runner” track that would bring the low-pressure system up the East Coast. That would tug ashore a filament of warm air at the mid levels. While high pressure over Ontario is currently banking cold air in place across the East Coast, the incoming low will scour away that cold gradually. Thus, the Interstate 95 stretch from Washington, D.C., to Boston — including Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, New Haven, Conn., and Providence, R.I. — may begin with a thump of snow Sunday afternoon or evening before flipping to sleet and eventually all rain. Accumulations would probably be limited to a couple of slushy inches that would quickly fade away.
- **Also possible:** a second area of low pressure over the Hudson Bay could yank the storm farther north-northwestward, placing more of the East Coast on the warm side of the counterclockwise-spinning atmospheric eddy and maintaining a mainly rain event.

Areas west of Interstate 81 in the Mid-Atlantic should stay mostly snow, as will the Appalachians, leading to potential double-digit snowfall in places like the mountains of western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee, western Virginia, West Virginia, central Pennsylvania and parts of New York state. Eastern Ohio may see some snowfall with the “wraparound” on the back side of the departing low into Monday, which could receive some lake-effect enhancement. That’s something to watch for, Cleveland.

Meteorologists are also carefully tracking where a “dry slot” could end precipitation early and put a dent in realized totals.

Ice storm potential in Carolinas

Cold air draining down the Appalachians on Sunday may remain quite stubborn across central parts of extreme northern South Carolina and especially central North Carolina. With moisture and mildness riding up and over that shallow wedge of cold air hugging the ground, precipitation may fall as liquid rain before freezing on contact with the surface.

This is a particularly low-confidence element of the forecast, but ice storm conditions may be possible for some. We’ll fine-tune those predictions in the days ahead.

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HEADLINE	01/13 Oil production to rise in Canada oil sands
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/oil-sands-canada-dirty-carbon-environment-11642085980?mod=hp_lead_pos5
GIST	<p>TORONTO—Major oil companies, under pressure from investors and environmentalists, are fleeing Canada’s oil sands, the fourth-largest oil reserve in the world and by some measures one of the most environmentally unfriendly. Investment in existing projects has stalled, and banks are refusing to fund new ones.</p> <p>Nevertheless, oil production there is expected to continue for at least two more decades. Local companies have stepped in to keep working the existing mines and wells. Last year, the oil sands were on track to deliver more oil than ever.</p> <p>Governments and financial institutions are pushing to wean the world from fossil fuels to address climate change. But demand for energy remains robust. So long as existing oil fields—no matter their carbon footprint—remain profitable, they are likely to remain in production long after big-name multinational companies walk away.</p> <p>There are still roughly 170 billion barrels of thick, tar-like bitumen under boreal forests in the Canadian province of Alberta, the largest amount outside of Saudi Arabia, Venezuela and Iran. Domestic companies such as Canadian Natural Resources Ltd., Suncor Energy Inc., Cenovus Energy Inc. and Imperial Oil Ltd., an affiliate of Exxon Mobil Corp., extracted more crude from those fields in last year’s third quarter than the same period a year earlier.</p>

Politicians and others pushing for a rapid transition to cleaner energy sources face a conundrum. Despite intensifying efforts to transition the global economy away from fossil fuels, alternative energy sources currently come nowhere near meeting present demand. That means companies will continue to pump oil even from carbon-intensive sources.

“We will continue to see growth,” said Alex Pourbaix, chief executive of Calgary-based Cenovus, which doubled its dividend last year. Cenovus increased third-quarter oil sands production by almost 50,000 barrels a day.

Mr. Pourbaix said the world-wide push for renewable energy wouldn’t reduce oil’s importance as a cheap energy source anytime soon. “There’s no technology at all of scale that can replace what oil can do,” he said. “That’s just reality.”

The benchmark West Texas Intermediate oil price in the U.S., which [fell to record lows in the spring of 2020](#), rose [above \\$70 a barrel in June](#) for the first time since 2018.

The sharp rise in prices has prompted even world leaders committed to reducing emissions to call for more production. President Biden asked the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries last year to boost production, after gasoline prices climbed, and in November he released oil from the U.S.’s strategic reserve in a bid to tame gas costs. He also supported the construction of a replacement for Line 3, a pipeline operated by Calgary-based [Enbridge](#) Inc. that brings crude from the oil sands to the U.S.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is spending more than \$12.5 billion [to expand the Trans Mountain pipeline](#), which carries crude from the oil sands to Canada’s west coast. The expansion, when it is finished sometime in 2023, will triple Trans Mountain’s capacity to almost 900,000 barrels a day, giving companies such as Cenovus and Suncor greater access to growing markets in Asia.

Mr. Trudeau has said that money from Canada’s oil industry will fund its transition to greener energy.

The production increases in Canada’s oil sands are happening despite a yearslong flight of capital from the area. The region, once one of the energy world’s hottest investment destinations, has become a dead zone for foreign investment.

Since 2017, major oil companies such as Royal Dutch Shell PLC, ConocoPhillips and Total SA have announced plans to sell their Canadian assets or have sold them. The reasons cited include greenhouse-gas emissions and unattractive returns. Chevron Corp. Chief Executive Michael Wirth said he was open to selling a stake in the region because it wasn’t a strategic asset for the company.

Some investment funds managed by BlackRock Inc. and Norway’s sovereign-wealth fund have cut oil sands investments from their portfolios. Last year, the Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec, one of Canada’s largest pension funds, announced it will sell all its holdings of oil company stocks, including its interests in Canadian companies, by the end of 2022.

“The philosophy behind this is to avoid contributing to additional oil supply,” said Charles Emond, chief executive of the fund, in September. The Caisse manages more than \$300 billion in assets for public employees in the province of Quebec, about 1% of which is invested in the stock of oil producers. “This is a leadership decision in the face of the climate crisis.”

As international energy companies have moved out of the oil sands, though, smaller independents and private investors have come in, and some have moved to increase production.

Adam Waterous, chief executive of the Waterous Energy Fund, a Calgary-based private-equity firm, said the firm has bought three oil sands projects in Alberta over the past two years. Together, the projects produce between 50,000 and 60,000 barrels per day, a number he said could increase to 100,000 barrels a day within the next five years. As a private investor, he said, his company has more freedom to increase

production, while investing in technologies to reduce carbon emissions, because it doesn't have to answer to public shareholders.

Canada's petroleum industry accounts for roughly 5% of the nation's economic output. For all but two of the years since 2008, oil has been Canada's top trade export.

An 88,000-square-mile area in northeast Alberta, the oil sands boomed between 2000 and 2014. Global companies, lured to the region by high oil prices and plentiful supply, raced to Alberta to build extraction megaprojects with names like Sunrise, Peace River and Surmont.

During the boom years, investment in the oil sands totaled \$183 billion. Capital spending rose steadily, from \$3.3 billion at the beginning of the century to \$26.4 billion at its peak in 2014, according to the Alberta Energy Regulator, the provincial department that regulates Alberta's energy industry.

Alberta's crude is buried under quartz sand and is difficult to extract. Producers either claw the oil-infused sand out of the ground using excavators that look like dinosaurs, or pump the crude out of wells by injecting steam deep into the earth to liquefy it.

The oil requires a lot of energy to extract and visibly scars the landscape. The mining process creates a slurry of quartz sand, water and toxic chemicals, which is kept in huge reservoirs called tailings ponds that are so big they can be seen from outer space. At the oil wells, thick plumes of steam billow overhead from the millions of gallons of water heated by natural-gas facilities.

According to research firm Rystad Energy, oil sands production in Alberta generates roughly 160 pounds of carbon per barrel, a higher greenhouse-gas emission than any other oil in the world. The firm described the level as "staggering." U.S. shale oil producers, by comparison, generate an average of 26 pounds per barrel.

Environmentalists began to target the region around 2002, when officials in Alberta first quantified the size of its reserves. "They are arguably the most visible human scars on the planet," said Bill McKibben, a prominent environmentalist and co-founder of 350.org, a group dedicated to stopping the use of fossil fuels world-wide.

Actor Leonardo DiCaprio visited the oil sands in 2014 and produced a National Geographic documentary on climate change that singled out the region. Groups such as 350.org, Rainforest Action Network and Sierra Club organized protests in Washington, disrupted pipeline construction projects and pressured banks and financial institutions to pull funding for oil sand projects.

A drop in the price of oil in 2014, coupled with pressure from shareholders of energy company to reduce emissions, affected investment. In 2020, capital spending on oil sands projects hit a 16-year low, totaling \$5.8 billion, according to the Alberta Energy Regulator. Such capital investment has declined every year since it peaked in 2014. It was forecast to have risen slightly in 2021, but remain lower than it was in 2019.

In 2017, when Shell announced the sale of several oil sands assets for \$7.25 billion, Chief Executive Ben van Beurden said that the company wanted to boost returns. The announcement came at the same time the company said it was linking director bonuses to greenhouse-gas emission reductions.

In June 2021, Calgary-based pipeline operator TC Energy Corp. announced it was ending a 12-year effort to build the Keystone XL pipeline extension, a conduit for Canada to get its oil to the U.S. market. The announcement came six months after Mr. Biden kept a campaign promise by canceling the permit that had allowed the pipeline's construction to move forward.

Almost 60 financial institutions, including Deutsche Bank, HSBC Holdings PLC and insurance company Hartford Financial Services Group Inc., have curbed their oil sands investments. In July, Japan Petroleum

Exploration Co. , Japan's state-backed oil-and-gas company known as Japex, which first leased land in Alberta in 1978, announced it sold its stake in the Hangingstone oil sands project at a loss of \$800 million.

Employment in Canada's oil-and-gas industry declined by 17% between 2014 and 2019, from 226,500 to 188,760 in 2019, according to Petroleum Labour Market Information, a division of the Energy Safety Canada, an organization that works with companies and workers to set industry safety standards. The nonprofit estimated that Covid-19-related layoffs accelerated the downward trend, and that the industry shed another 20,000 jobs in 2020.

The toll is visible in Calgary, the corporate hub of Canada's energy industry. The steel and glass skyscrapers that tower over the prairie landscape on the shores of the Bow River were built during the industry's heyday. Today, many are nearly empty. Downtown Calgary had a commercial real-estate vacancy rate of 33% in the third quarter of 2021, the highest in North America, according to CBRE Group, a commercial-real-estate services firm. Houston's vacancy rate, by comparison, was 24%.

Eventually, the lack of investment will cause production to dwindle as oil from some projects is depleted, analysts say. Some projects could start to deplete by the middle of the next decade, according to Kevin Birn, an analyst with IHS Markit.

Some mines are being modified as the original reserves run low. The North Mine at the Syncrude project, which is operated by Suncor, is expected to be depleted by the middle of this decade, but an extension of the mine is being built that will keep it producing for another 14 years.

Newer projects, though, are likely to produce far into the future. Fort Hills, an open pit truck and shovel mine run by Suncor, completed in 2018, can produce almost 200,000 barrels of oil a day. It can run for the next 50 years, based on current plans.

In October, producers extracted more than 3.84 million barrels a day from Alberta, a record, according to the Alberta Energy Regulator. Between January and October, production totaled 1.09 billion barrels, also a record.

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HEADLINE	01/13 New virus mandates US-Canada border
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/truckers-fret-over-pending-covid-19-vaccine-rules-at-u-s-canada-border-11642118416?mod=hp_listb_pos3
GIST	<p>OTTAWA—Trucking companies and manufacturers say new Covid-19 vaccine mandates set to take effect at the U.S.-Canada border could upend an already fragile logistics network.</p> <p>The two countries have allowed trade to cross their border unimpeded since the start of the pandemic. Tourist entry at the land border was prohibited until late last year. But in November, both the U.S. and Canada said they would require truck drivers to be vaccinated in order to enter their respective countries.</p> <p>The Canadian rules kick in on Saturday, when Canada will ban U.S. and other foreign truckers from entering the country unless they are fully vaccinated. Canada will require unvaccinated Canadian drivers to show a negative, molecular Covid-19 test taken 72 hours prior to reaching the border before they are allowed entry. Those drivers will also have to quarantine for a 14-day period, which industry groups say will hurt fleets that are already short-staffed.</p> <p>The U.S. has said Canadian truck drivers without two shots of an authorized Covid-19 vaccine would be denied entry starting Jan. 22. Absent a bilateral solution, trucking and manufacturing trade groups warn of supply-chain upheaval that could lead to further price increases and a possible shortage of critical goods such as food.</p>

According to U.S. trade data, two-way trade in merchandise goods between the U.S. and Canada totaled over \$600 billion in 2019. About 80% of those goods move on trucks, the Canadian exporter and trucking sectors estimate.

In a separate development, the U.S. Supreme Court on Thursday blocked the Biden administration's Covid-19 vaccine-or-testing rules for large private employers, which U.S. trucking executives and some industry groups have said could deepen upheaval in domestic supply chains. The decision does not affect the coming border restrictions.

"It's a relief," said Eric Fuller, chief executive of US Xpress Enterprises Inc., a large trucking carrier based in Chattanooga, Tenn. "As much as I wish everyone would get vaccinated, this mandate was going to create a lot of headaches for a lot of companies."

The American Trucking Associations, an industry group, is urging leaders in Ottawa and Washington to reconsider the cross-border mandates "so we can avoid any further economic disruptions," said Bob Costello, the group's chief economist and senior vice president of international trade policy and cross-border operations.

Professional drivers spend much of their time alone and have lower infection and absentee rates than the general public, Mr. Costello said. "We believe these mandates will only serve to push drivers out of the industry or away from these routes, further straining the supply chain between the U.S. and our biggest trading partner."

A spokeswoman for the U.S. Embassy in Ottawa didn't respond to a request for comment.

Meanwhile in Canada, the government issued a statement late Thursday afternoon reiterating that the trucker-focused vaccine mandate remained in place. A statement said information previously provided to Reuters and The Canadian Press news agency, indicating Ottawa was partly reversing some of the rules as they applied to Canadian truck drivers, "was provided in error." Late Wednesday night, the two news agencies had reported Canada was reversing some of the proposed rules.

The statement, jointly written by the ministers of health, public safety and transport, said the country's response to the Covid-19 pandemic would give priority to the health and safety of Canadians. Border measures could be lifted or adjusted depending on Covid-19 case counts and hospitalization rates, the statement also said.

Lance Dixon, senior vice president of Omaha, Neb.-based Werner Enterprises Inc.'s Mexico, Canada and temperature-controlled divisions, said the truckload carrier anticipates "increased delays at the border resulting from freight bottlenecks as agents verify vaccine status of drivers, officials educate those who are unprepared, and drivers become accustomed to this new procedure."

Over 80% of the company's cross-border fleet is vaccinated and partner carriers are fully vaccinated, Mr. Dixon said.

Stephen Laskowski, president of the Canadian Trucking Alliance, said a survey of Canadian truckers suggested that "at least" 10% of 120,000 truckers in the country weren't vaccinated. "We are already short truck drivers in Canada," he said, citing data from Statistics Canada indicating there were 23,000 job vacancies in the sector.

Difficulties hiring and retaining truck drivers on both sides of the border have contributed to supply-chain disruptions that have weighed on economic activity in North America and globally. "If you introduce this vaccine mandate, that piece of the problem gets bigger," Mr. Laskowski said.

Dennis Darby, president of the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters, a lobby group, warned Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in a Jan. 11 letter against implementing the vaccine mandate for Canadian and U.S. truckers at the border.

	“Without adequate trucking services, manufacturers would be unable to maintain their current supply chains and production will stop or slow across the country,” he said.
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HEADLINE	01/13 ‘Full employment’ inflation risks emerge
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/economys-fate-might-hinge-on-question-of-full-employment-11642081833?mod=hp_major_pos1#cxrecs_s
GIST	<p>For workers, it is great news: the U.S. labor market is nearing, or may already be at, its ideal state of “full employment.” But for the economy as a whole, it risks introducing a new source of upward pressure on inflation.</p> <p>Full employment refers to a labor market in which just about anyone who wants a job can get one, without wages and prices rising out of control. It is the ideal of a healthy, steadily growing economy. In theory, once employment passes that level, wage pressures start to build which employers may pass along in prices.</p> <p>While economists don’t agree on a single definition of full employment, some see signs the U.S. is getting there or may have already passed it: plummeting unemployment and accelerating wage growth.</p> <p>The Federal Reserve under Chairman Jerome Powell has resisted precisely defining full employment, sometimes called maximum employment. But one guidepost comes from its projections of where the unemployment rate will settle in the long run. In December, most officials thought that was around 4%.</p> <p>By that measure, the U.S. is already there. In December, the unemployment rate fell to 3.9%, down from 6.7% a year earlier, the Labor Department said last week. Economists surveyed by The Wall Street Journal expect it to reach 3.5% at the end of this year.</p> <p>Meanwhile, employers added just 199,000 jobs last month, less than half the average monthly gain for all of 2021. Hourly wages rose 4.7% in December from a year earlier, far higher than the 2.9% gain in 2019. Workers are quitting at the highest rate on record, often for higher pay.</p> <p>On the surface, that suggests there simply aren’t many workers left to hire and that the recovery has run its course. With inflation at a near-40 year high of 7% in December, conditions seem to meet the textbook definition of full employment.</p> <p>In fact, Sung Won Sohn, a professor of finance and economics at Loyola Marymount University, said the U.S. is above full employment. And he points to anecdotal evidence that higher wages are contributing to higher inflation, even if they aren’t the main driver right now. Last year, Chipotle Mexican Grill Inc. raised prices to offset higher labor costs. The Fed, in a report known as the Beige Book, said this week that, in parts of the mid-Atlantic region, “many firms reported raising wages and passing the higher labor costs through to final prices.”</p> <p>Dr. Sohn says that for most workers, consumer prices rose faster than their wages over the past year, and that they are now—or will soon at least—pressure their employers to raise their pay to keep up with inflation. In turn, businesses will raise prices further to maintain profit margins.</p> <p>Dr. Sohn predicts that wages will rise between 5% and 6% this year, faster than his 2022 projection for inflation of between 3% and 4%. “The wage price spiral has begun,” Dr. Sohn said. “Once it starts, it just doesn’t die down on its own.”</p> <p>Higher wages are good for workers only if they aren’t eaten up by inflation. In theory, if wages grow faster than workers’ productivity, either prices must go up or profit margins must narrow.</p>

The American Bankers Association said this week it expects wages to grow between 4.5% to 5% this year, and that businesses will respond by investing in technology. Such investments typically improve productivity, allowing companies to reduce costs by making more with less. The group believes that inflation will cool to 3% this year as supply-chain bottlenecks ease.

The debate over whether full employment has been achieved hinges largely on the size of the labor force, which was 1.4% smaller, or 2.9 million people fewer, in December than before the pandemic. Are those people gone for good, or will some come off the sidelines and apply for one of the many job openings?

Through August, roughly 2.4 million workers retired early because of the pandemic, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. Most are unlikely to return.

Dr. Sohn thinks some workers have opted to stay home and raise their children while their spouses work. “Their attitudes are totally different about employment,” Dr. Sohn said. “They are really not in a hurry to come back to work.”

If he is right, then labor supply would remain tight, the unemployment rate would continue to fall, and rising wages would pressure inflation as companies compete for workers by boosting pay.

But others think the labor market has more room to run, including Mr. Powell. At his Senate hearing Tuesday for confirmation to a second term, the Fed chairman said the labor market is rapidly approaching or at maximum employment.

Nonetheless, he said inflation is at a near-40 year high of 7% not because of a hot labor market and rising wages, but because of product shortages caused by supply-chain disruptions and stronger demand that resulted from aggressive stimulus.

High inflation does, however, threaten the economy’s ability to stay at full employment, he said. Fed officials believe the labor force may rebound in coming years, allowing healthy growth in employment without labor shortages spurring higher costs. If inflation forces the Fed to [raise interest rates sharply](#), it could short-circuit that recovery in both the labor force and employment, they say.

The Fed’s plans to raise interest rates this year could be both a response to a labor market that is achieving full employment and an attempt to help it stay there. “Achievement of maximum employment, by which we really mean continued progress in hiring and in participation, is going to require price stability,” Mr. Powell said.

Some economists point out that the U.S. still has roughly 3.6 million fewer jobs than just before the pandemic. They say the unemployment rate is artificially low because of the depleted pool of job hunters which they attribute to Covid-19, a [shortage of child care](#) and [virus-related school closures](#) that are keeping many workers on the sidelines. In coming months as [vaccination or immunity reduce illness](#) or fear of it and household savings are depleted, workers will return to the labor force, these economists say.

In the previous expansion, unemployment repeatedly fell below levels economists thought would spur inflation without that happening.

Still, there are big questions about the long-term supply of labor. Immigration has fallen sharply and it isn’t clear whether it will recover while some workers may be unable to return to the job because of long-term Covid complications, said Diane Swonk, chief economist at the advisory firm Grant Thornton LLP.

Whether the U.S. is at full employment Is “not an easy question to answer because the virus has distorted so much of the supply” of labor, she said.

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HEADLINE	01/13 Russia warns ready to abandon diplomacy
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/world/europe/russia-ukraine-talks.html

VIENNA — Russian officials signaled on Thursday that they might abandon diplomatic efforts to resolve the security crisis surrounding Ukraine, bringing a whirlwind week of European diplomacy to an ominous end and deflating hopes that negotiators could forge a path toward easing tensions in Eastern Europe.

One senior Russian diplomat said that talks with the West were approaching a “dead end,” while another said the Kremlin would wait until it received written responses to its demands from Washington and from NATO next week before deciding how to proceed.

It was clear that Russia’s next move would be up to President Vladimir V. Putin, who, his spokesman said on Thursday, was being briefed regularly this week on negotiations with the West.

“The United States and its allies are actually saying ‘no’ to key elements of these texts,” Russia’s deputy foreign minister, Sergei A. Ryabkov, said, referring to the draft agreements with NATO and Washington [that Russia published last month](#). “This is what we call a dead end or a different approach.”

In Washington, Jake Sullivan, President Biden’s national security adviser, told reporters that after a week of diplomacy, the United States was ready to talk further, especially about missile deployments and military exercises in Europe, but was also preparing to respond “to a further Russian invasion of Ukraine.”

“We have been very clear with Russia on the costs and consequences of further military action or destabilization,” Mr. Sullivan said. “So we’re ready either way.”

Mr. Sullivan said the Russian responses to the meetings in Geneva, Brussels and Vienna had been contradictory, noting that some officials have been “hopeful” and others sounded “deeply pessimistic.” But he added, “I’m not going to put myself in the head of the Russians,” and noted that American intelligence agencies had still not determined that the Russians had definitively decided on a military course of action.

The United States representative to Thursday’s meeting, Michael R. Carpenter, also depicted the two sides as engaged in a standoff with no clear resolution.

“We must never stand for the flouting or erosion of our bedrock principles,” Mr. Carpenter said. “That means no tolerance for overt or tacit spheres of influence, no restrictions on the sovereign right of nations to choose their own alliances, no privileging one state’s security requirements over those of another.”

[Russia is demanding that NATO drastically scale back](#) its presence near Russia’s borders in Eastern Europe, including stopping all military cooperation with Ukraine and providing legally binding guarantees that the country will never join the alliance. Mr. Ryabkov said that dialogue with the United States was continuing but also warned that Mr. Putin was receiving options from the military about what to do “in the case of a deterioration of the situation.”

Those options, analysts and Western officials believe, are likely to involve new Russian military action against Ukraine. Joining this week’s discussions for the first time on Thursday, Ukraine said it had identified 106,000 Russian troops and 1,500 tanks near its border, and accused Moscow of pointing a “gun at our common European security.”

The gathering on Thursday, the last of three negotiating sessions this week between Russia and the West, took place in Vienna at a meeting of the 57-country Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, a group that includes Russia and Ukraine as well as the United States.

“It seems that the risk of war in the O.S.C.E. area is now greater than ever before in the last 30 years,” Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau of Poland, which took over the rotating chairmanship of the organization this year, said in opening the session.

The West insists all countries must have the freedom to choose their alliances, while the Kremlin says that NATO cannot expand eastward, and that Western military cooperation with post-Soviet countries like Ukraine presents an existential threat to Russia's security.

While Russian officials said this week that they were impressed with the seriousness with which the Biden administration — which the Kremlin sees as its main counterpart — engaged in the talks, there was no sign on Thursday that the impasse had been broken.

And while American officials say they are prepared to discuss some of Russia's concerns — such as negotiating reciprocal limits on where and how military exercises are conducted, or perhaps reviving the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which the United States pulled out of two years ago — they reject any discussion of Russia's central demand to roll back NATO expansion.

And it is that larger goal that seems to be driving Russia in the negotiations, as it seeks to keep Ukraine out of NATO and NATO forces from placing troops or weapons in former Soviet states that have since joined the Western alliance. The United States has insisted it will not abandon core principles, including the right of nations to pick their allies, which is at the heart of NATO's "open door" policy.

In Moscow, Russia's foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, also adopted a pessimistic tone.

"The hard reality right now is that we were promised a written reaction," Mr. Lavrov said in an interview aired on Thursday, according to the Interfax news agency. "We will wait for it. And then we will determine our next steps."

Mr. Carpenter, asked about Mr. Lavrov's comments, said he did not know whether or not such a written response was coming.

Ukraine, rejecting Russia's denials that it had no plans to invade, said Russia's massing of troops near the Ukrainian border needed to be reversed.

"The Russian leadership proves once again Moscow's voluntarism to point the gun at our common European security at any moment they want," said Ukraine's representative, Yevhenii Tsymbaliuk.

Thursday's talks were at a lower diplomatic level than the negotiations in Brussels and Geneva earlier this week, with no one above the ambassador rank in attendance from the key countries involved. Their host, the O.S.C.E., is expected to serve as a key venue for more negotiations if the Kremlin decides to pursue diplomacy.

"We are not indifferent to security objections voiced by participating states," Mr. Rau, the Polish foreign minister, said. "I believe that the O.S.C.E. is the right platform to discuss every aspect of comprehensive security."

It was the latest sign that Western countries are scrambling to engage with Russia, which has warned of a "military-technical" response if concerns over its security — such as overt Western military cooperation with Ukraine — are not addressed.

While Russia denies it has plans to invade Ukraine, researchers [have identified](#) some new signs of Russian troops moving toward the Ukrainian border in recent days.

Russia's representative at the talks on Thursday in Vienna, Aleksandr Lukashevich, underscored that Moscow was not ruling out the possibility of further negotiations. Military analysts have noted that were Russia to invade Ukraine, the wintertime frozen ground would be advantageous to its heavy armor.

"If we do not hear a constructive response on our proposals in a reasonable time frame," Mr. Lukashevich said in remarks released by his office, "we will be forced to draw the corresponding conclusions and take

	all necessary measures to assure the strategic balance and remove unacceptable threats to our national security.”
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HEADLINE	01/13 Prince Andrew stripped of military titles
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/world/europe/prince-andrew-military-titles-abuse-case.html
GIST	<p>LONDON — Prince Andrew, the second son of Queen Elizabeth II, has been forced to relinquish his military titles and royal charities, Buckingham Palace said on Thursday, a stinging rebuke by the British royal family a day after a federal judge in New York allowed a sexual abuse case against him to go ahead.</p> <p>The palace said that Andrew, 61, who has been accused by Virginia Giuffre of raping her while she was a teenager, would also no longer use the title “His Royal Highness,” a prized symbol of his status as a senior member of the royal family. In a terse statement, the palace said that Andrew would “continue not to undertake any public duties” and that he “is defending this case as a private citizen.”</p> <p>Andrew, who is also known as the Duke of York, has denied Ms. Giuffre’s allegations, which date from a period in which he was friendly with the financier and convicted sex predator Jeffrey Epstein. The duke’s lawyers tried to get her lawsuit dismissed, but the judge, Lewis A. Kaplan, ruled against him on Wednesday.</p> <p>The decision by Buckingham Palace completes a stunning fall from grace for a man who was once one of the royal family’s most popular members — a dashing war hero and eligible bachelor — but who has since become a disgraced figure, left to explain why he associated with a convicted criminal like Mr. Epstein.</p> <p>The announcement by Buckingham Palace came after extensive discussions within the royal family, according to people with ties to the palace. It was designed to head off an effort by Andrew to rehabilitate himself, according to one person. The language in Buckingham Palace’s statement, officials said, was meant to underscore the permanence of the sanction against him.</p> <p>Andrew had been largely banished from public life since November 2019, when he gave a disastrous interview to the BBC in which he insisted he had never met Ms. Giuffre and made several bizarre claims to deflect her charges, among them that he was medically incapable of sweating, as she had asserted.</p> <p>But the prince, who served as a helicopter pilot in the Falklands War, continued to hold several honorary military titles, some of which he had inherited from his late father, Prince Philip. That aroused protests from veterans of those units, who said it was unseemly to be under the command of someone with such charges hanging over him.</p> <p>The decision to deprive Andrew of his military titles and the honorific “His Royal Highness” puts him on the same footing as his nephew, Prince Harry, who was forced to give up both after he and his wife, Meghan, withdrew from royal duties and moved to Southern California in 2020.</p> <p>But it could weaken Andrew’s standing as he fights the charges, since he will no longer have the weight of the crown behind him.</p> <p>A palace official said that all of the duke’s roles had been turned back to the queen and would be redistributed to other members of the royal family. The official said the duke’s honors would not be returned to him.</p> <p>The definitive nature of Buckingham Palace’s announcement seemed calculated to put as much distance as possible between the queen and any potentially lurid disclosures that could come in depositions of the prince, Ms. Giuffre or other witnesses if the case goes to trial.</p>

In his ruling on Andrew's motion to dismiss the case, the judge recapitulated the allegations in Ms. Giuffre's lawsuit. In one, which occurred during a visit to Mr. Epstein's house in Manhattan, she said she was forced by Ghislaine Maxwell, a friend of Mr. Epstein and the prince, "to sit on Prince Andrew's lap, as Prince Andrew touched her."

Ms. Maxwell was convicted last month of five of six criminal charges against her, including sex trafficking. Mr. Epstein, 66, was found hanged [in a Manhattan jail cell](#) in 2019 while awaiting a sex-trafficking trial. His death was ruled a suicide. Andrew has not been charged with a crime and figured only tangentially in Ms. Maxwell's trial.

While the prince has already largely vanished from public view, his military affiliations were a lingering source of tension at a time when the royal family had hoped to showcase the queen's 70 years on the throne.

More than 150 Royal Navy, R.A.F. and Army veterans [signed a letter to the queen](#), asking her to strip Andrew of his eight British military appointments, which include colonel-in-chief of the Royal Irish Regiment, royal colonel of the Royal Regiment of Scotland, and colonel of the Grenadier Guards.

Julian Perreira, a former sergeant in the Grenadier Guards who served in Afghanistan, [told The Times of London recently](#) that Andrew "must step down immediately."

"Being allowed to retain his role as colonel of the Grenadier Guards and other military titles, Prince Andrew will put a stain on the regiment's proud history and will devalue the hard work of past and future generations of Grenadiers," Mr. Perreira wrote.

Andrew's reputation, critics say, has not been helped by his legal maneuvering. Rather than confronting Ms. Giuffre's allegations directly, the prince scrambled to avoid being served with legal papers in Britain. His lawyers have tried to get the case dismissed on jurisdictional grounds and, most recently, on the basis of a 2009 settlement between Ms. Giuffre and Mr. Epstein.

In that agreement, Mr. Epstein paid Ms. Giuffre \$500,000 to settle a lawsuit in which she had accused Mr. Epstein of sexually abusing her when she was a teenager, according to the deal, which was [unsealed this month](#).

Under the terms of that agreement, Ms. Giuffre had released Mr. Epstein and other "potential defendants" from further litigation, a category that lawyers for the duke argued included him. In rejecting Andrew's argument, Judge Kaplan did not address the merits of Ms. Giuffre's claims.

Royal watchers said that the prospect of a lengthy trial would cast a shadow over the queen's Platinum Jubilee year, which kicked off informally earlier this week when Buckingham Palace announced a nationwide competition to create the best recipe for a "platinum pudding."

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HEADLINE	01/14 NKorea lashes out; fires 2 ballistic missiles
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/14/world/asia/north-korea-missiles-us-sanctions.html
GIST	<p>SEOUL — North Korea fired two ballistic missiles on Friday, conducting its third missile test this month hours after it warned of "stronger and certain reaction" if the United States helped impose more sanctions on the North in response to its recent series of missile tests.</p> <p>Two short-range ballistic missiles took off from Pyonganbukdo, a province in the northwestern corner of North Korea, and flew to the east, the South Korean military said. It added that its analysts were studying the trajectory and other flight data from the launch to learn more.</p> <p>The new tests raised tensions at a sensitive time in the region, as China geared up for the Winter Olympics in Beijing next month and South Korea for its presidential election on March 9. The escalation also comes</p>

at a time when the Biden administration is struggling in its diplomacy to stave off a potential Russian invasion in Ukraine.

Earlier on Friday, the North's Foreign Ministry issued a statement denouncing a proposal by the United States that the U.N. Security Council place fresh sanctions on North Korea following its six ballistic and other missile tests since September 2021.

Separately on Wednesday, the Biden administration blacklisted [five North Korean officials](#) active in Russia and China who Washington said were responsible for procuring goods for North Korea's weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile-related programs.

North Korea resumed testing missiles in September after a six-month hiatus. It has since conducted at least seven missile tests, including the one on Friday. The tests involved a [long-range strategic cruise missile](#), [ballistic missiles rolled out of mountain tunnels](#) and a [mini submarine-launched ballistic missile](#).

In two tests this month, it launched what it called [hypersonic ballistic missiles](#) with detachable gliding warheads that made them harder to intercept because they could change course during flight.

All the tests violated U.N. Security Council resolutions that banned North Korea from developing or testing ballistic missile technologies or technologies used to make and deliver nuclear weapons. But the North's Foreign Ministry insisted on Friday that it was exercising "its right to self-defense" and that the missile tests were "part of its efforts for modernizing its national defense capability."

"The U.S. is intentionally escalating the situation even with the activation of independent sanctions, not content with referring the D.P.R.K.'s just activity to the U.N. Security Council," the ministry said in a statement, using the acronym for the North's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. It added, "If the U.S. adopts such a confrontational stance, the D.P.R.K. will be forced to take stronger and certain reaction to it."

The statement did not elaborate on North Korea's possible future actions. But the country has resumed missile tests since meetings between its leader, Kim Jong-un, and Donald J. Trump, then president, [ended without an agreement](#) on how to roll back the North's nuclear weapons program or when to lift sanctions.

Those tests indicated that the North was developing [more sophisticated ways](#) of delivering nuclear and other warheads to South Korea, Japan and American bases there on its shorter-range missiles, according to defense analysts. Some of the missiles it has tested since 2019 have used solid fuel and have made midair maneuvers, making them harder to intercept, the analysts said.

North Korea has not resumed testing any long-range missiles of the kind that could directly threaten the continental United States since it conducted three intercontinental ballistic missile tests in 2017. But since the Kim-Trump diplomacy collapsed, North Korea has warned that it [no longer felt bound](#) by its self-imposed moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile tests. It has since unveiled [its largest-ever, still-untested ICBM](#) during a military parade and [exhibition](#).

During a [Workers' Party meeting](#) in January last year, Mr. Kim vowed to make more sophisticated short-range nuclear missiles, hypersonic missiles, large ICBMs and submarine-launched long-range missiles, as well as to place military spy satellites into orbit.

On Friday, North Korea reiterated that its missile tests "did not target any specific country or force and it did not do any harm to the security of neighboring countries." But in the test on Tuesday, the North's hypersonic missile traversed the country from west to east and then veered to the northeast, flying over the waters between the Russian Far East and Japan toward the Pacific, according to its trajectory graphic in one of the photos released in North Korean state media.

	<p>The missile hit a target 621 miles away, the North said. And as the missile hurtled out of North Korea at up to 10 times the speed of sound, aviation regulators briefly halted flights out of some airports on the U.S. West Coast as a precaution.</p> <p>It was the first missile test that Mr. Kim had attended since March 2020, according to reports in North Korean media.</p> <p>The test prompted South Korea to reassure its residents this week that its military can detect and intercept the North's new missiles.</p> <p>Washington has repeatedly urged North Korea to return to talks, but the country has said it would not until it was convinced that the United States would remove its "hostile" policy, including sanctions.</p> <p>China, which can veto Washington's attempt to impose more sanctions at the Security Council, called for dialogue.</p> <p>"Willful sanctions do not help resolve the Korean Peninsula issue, but only worsen the confrontational mood," Wang Wenbin, a spokesman of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, said during a news briefing on Wednesday.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 UK monarchy, govt. in simultaneous crises
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/world/europe/boris-johnson-prince-andrew-royals.html
GIST	<p>LONDON — When Prime Minister Boris Johnson of Britain was hospitalized with Covid in April 2020, the alarming news bulletin came soon after a televised address by Queen Elizabeth II, in which she reassured the British public that after the pandemic ebbed, "We will meet again."</p> <p>Stoic, dignified and comforting, the queen's words helped anchor the country during the fretful days that followed — not the first time the monarchy has acted as a stabilizing force for the government during tumultuous events.</p> <p>This week, however, both of these grand British institutions pitched simultaneously into crisis. On Wednesday, Mr. Johnson admitted attending a garden party not long after he had recovered from the virus, which violated lockdown rules and set off a chorus of calls for him to resign. Hours later, a federal judge in Manhattan rejected a bid by the queen's second son, Prince Andrew, to throw out a sex abuse lawsuit against him.</p> <p>On Thursday, Buckingham Palace announced that it would force Andrew to relinquish all his military titles and the honorific, "His Royal Highness." He "is defending this case as a private citizen," the palace said in a terse statement that underscored the finality of the prince's exile from royal life.</p> <p>While these cases are about starkly different issues, they both feature privileged middle-aged men under fire for their behavior, raising age-old questions of class, entitlement and double standards.</p> <p>"Boris Johnson and Prince Andrew," Alastair Campbell, a former communications director for Prime Minister Tony Blair, said in a Twitter post. "What an image the world is getting of Global Britain."</p> <p>Mr. Campbell was involved in a now-celebrated episode in which a more stable government helped a monarchy in crisis: In 1997, he and Mr. Blair, a popular Labour leader coming off a landslide election victory, persuaded the queen to strike a more empathetic tone in reacting to the death of Princess Diana in a car crash. That defused a growing tide of resentment against the monarch.</p> <p>"Normally," Mr. Campbell said, "they avoid crises at the same time."</p> <p>Commentators said, half in jest, that the legal ruling against Andrew, 61, helped Mr. Johnson, 57, because it deflected attention from his grilling in the House of Commons, where opposition lawmakers accused</p>

him of lying and demanded that he resign. But both men are at the mercy of forces largely out of their control.

Mr. Johnson has asked lawmakers to defer judgment on him, pending the results of an internal investigation into Downing Street's parties by a senior civil servant, Sue Gray. If she determines that Mr. Johnson misled Parliament in his previous statements, it will almost certainly cost him his job.

Andrew, by failing to win the dismissal of a suit brought by Virginia Giuffre, faces the prospect of damning disclosures in depositions of him and Ms. Giuffre, who claimed he raped her when she was a teenager. She says she was trafficked to Andrew by his friend, the convicted sex predator Jeffrey Epstein. Andrew flatly denies the charge and has said he has no recollection of meeting Ms. Giuffre.

What the two cases have in common, critics said, is a lack of accountability on the part of the main actors.

Mr. Johnson, in apologizing for the party, acknowledged the anger that the public would feel "when they think in Downing Street itself the rules are not being properly followed by the people who make the rules." But he insisted that he viewed the gathering as a "work event" — one that he attended for only 25 minutes — an alibi that placed the blame on his subordinates who organized the gathering.

Andrew has not commented on his legal setback. But he and his lawyers have maneuvered to avoid confronting Ms. Giuffre's accusations at a trial. He scrambled to avoid being served with legal papers in Britain. His lawyers tried to get the case dismissed on jurisdictional grounds and, most recently, on the basis of a settlement agreement between Ms. Giuffre and Mr. Epstein.

With so much at stake, especially in a year in which the queen is celebrating 70 years on the throne, royal watchers speculate that Andrew will seek his own settlement with Ms. Giuffre. Who would pay that settlement, and with what money, are already questions being asked by British newspapers.

Buckingham Palace's announcement that it would remove Andrew's military titles and deny him "His Royal Highness" suggests he has no path to rehabilitate himself. It is the kind of ruthless action that Conservative Party lawmakers have yet to take against Mr. Johnson, despite their frustration with him.

As a constitutional monarch, the queen will steer clear of any questions about Mr. Johnson's political future — or of politics in general. But that does not mean she is without influence. Legal experts say the monarchy, because of its longevity and constancy, can have a moderating effect on the most extreme forces in politics.

"The monarchy acts as a 'balance wheel' in the sense of being an institution that, when political actors have tipped the ship of state too far in one direction, can tip it back in the other," said Harold Hongju Koh, an American legal scholar who is a visiting professor at the University of Oxford this year.

It is a delicate balance. In late 2019, Mr. Johnson came under criticism for asking the queen to approve his government's suspension of Parliament, a move that Britain's Supreme Court later ruled unlawful because it was designed to squelch debate over his plans to pull the country out of the European Union.

Unlike in April 2020, when the queen sent an ailing Mr. Johnson her best wishes, she is almost certain to remain silent about his current plight. If anything, her disciplined adherence to social distancing rules — captured most poignantly when she grieved alone in a choir stall at the funeral of her husband, Prince Philip, last year — is a vivid contrast to the prime minister's after-work socializing.

For Mr. Johnson, the illicit parties are so damaging because they register with the public in a way that other scandals, like the costly re-decoration of his apartment on Downing Street or his defense of an ethically challenged lawmaker, do not. The sense of a double standard, once implanted, is hard to shake.

"Most people are not interested in politics, and so many issues which excite the political commentators have no resonance with them. But this is different," said Vernon Bogdanor, a professor of government at

	King's College London. "There are so many people who could not see elderly, ailing or dying relatives during this period," he said. "They will tell their family and friends."
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HEADLINE	01/14 IEA: surge electricity demand push volatility
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/jan/14/global-surge-in-electricity-use-could-bring-three-more-years-of-price-rises
GIST	<p>The global surge in demand for energy could spark another three years of market volatility and record power plant pollution unless countries make major changes to how they generate electricity, the world's energy watchdog has warned.</p> <p>The International Energy Agency recorded the steepest ever increase in electricity demand last year, which triggered blackouts in major economies and led to historic energy price highs and record emissions.</p> <p>The IEA's annual electricity report said this could continue for another three years, with serious consequences for consumers and economies unless there is a faster structural change to the way electricity is produced.</p> <p>"Sharp spikes in electricity prices in recent times have been causing hardship for many households and businesses around the world and risk becoming a driver of social and political tensions," said the IEA's executive director, Fatih Birol.</p> <p>The IEA found that the world's demand for electricity surged by 6% last year, following the global economic rebound from the 2020 pandemic recession, the steepest increase since 2010 when economies began to bounce back from the global financial crisis. The total increase in electricity demand was over 1,500 terawatt-hours, the largest on record.</p> <p>About half of the growth in electricity demand took place in China alone, where it rose by an estimated 10% compared with 2020. China and India both suffered from power cuts in the second half of the year because coal supplies failed to keep pace with the demand on their power plants, leading to an economic slowdown in Asia.</p> <p>In the UK, electricity market prices have reached record highs in recent months, in large part because the power grid continues to rely on gas-burning power plants for almost half of its electricity. The cost of running of these sites has rocketed following a global gas supply crunch which has triggered record high market prices across Europe.</p> <p>The rising cost of keeping the lights on has left the UK facing a national energy crisis as household bills have rocketed, energy suppliers have collapsed and factories have been forced to shut.</p> <p>The global strain on electricity systems has also led to record emissions from power generation as economies turn to cheaper coal power plants to keep a lid on soaring costs.</p> <p>"Policymakers should be taking action now to soften the impacts on the most vulnerable and to address the underlying causes," Birol said. "Higher investment in low-carbon energy technologies including renewables, energy efficiency and nuclear power – alongside an expansion of robust and smart electricity grids – can help us get out of today's difficulties."</p> <p>The IEA's report found that renewable energy sources grew by 6% in 2021, but that increase was unable to keep pace with the surge in demand as economies reopened following the sudden Covid-19 lockdowns that had choked economic growth.</p> <p>In order to meet the rebound in demand for power, coal-fired plants generated 9% more electricity last year, or more than half of the global increase in power demand, to reach an all-time peak as gas became</p>

[more expensive](#). Electricity generated by gas power plants grew by 2% last year, according to the IEA, while nuclear generation increased by 3.5%.

The return to dirtier sources of electricity caused the world's total carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from power generation to climb by 7% to a new all-time high after having declined the two previous years, the IEA said.

Birol warned that emissions from electricity would need to decline by 55% by 2030 if the world hopes to limit the rise in global heating by becoming "net zero carbon" by 2050.

"But in the absence of major policy action from governments, those emissions are set to remain around the same level for the next three years," he said. "Not only does this highlight how far off track we currently are from a pathway to net zero emissions by 2050, but it also underscores the massive changes needed for the electricity sector to fulfil its critical role in decarbonising the broader energy system."

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HEADLINE	01/13 Large employers vaccine mandate blocked
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/us/politics/supreme-court-biden-vaccine-mandate.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court on Thursday blocked the Biden administration from enforcing a vaccine-or-testing mandate for large employers, dealing a blow to a key element of the White House's plan to address the pandemic as coronavirus cases resulting from the Omicron variant are on the rise.</p> <p>But in a modest victory for President Biden, the court allowed a more limited mandate requiring health care workers at facilities receiving federal money to be vaccinated.</p> <p>The vote in the employer mandate case was 6 to 3, with the liberal justices in dissent. The vote in the health care case was 5 to 4, with Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. and Justice Brett M. Kavanaugh joining the liberal justices to form a majority.</p> <p>The employer decision undercut one of President Biden's most significant attempts to tame the virus and left the country with a patchwork of state laws and policies, largely leaving companies and businesses on their own.</p> <p>The president welcomed the ruling in his favor, saying in a statement that it would save the lives of health care workers and patients. But he said he was disappointed that the court had overturned the employer mandate, which he said was "grounded squarely in both science and the law."</p> <p>In both the employer and health worker cases, the justices explored whether Congress had authorized the executive branch to take sweeping actions to address the health care crisis.</p> <p>The unsigned majority opinion in the employer case said a statute on workplace hazards did not justify a mandate that would have required more than 80 million workers to be vaccinated against the coronavirus or to wear masks and be tested weekly. It also stressed the novelty and sweep of the mandate issued by the Labor Department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration, or OSHA, saying Congress had not authorized the agency to act and describing its response as "a blunt instrument."</p> <p>The mandate "draws no distinctions based on industry or risk of exposure to Covid-19," the majority opinion said, adding that it was "a significant encroachment into the lives — and health — of a vast number of employees."</p> <p>But the opinion said more tailored regulations may be lawful given that "most lifeguards and linemen face the same regulations as do medics and meatpackers."</p>

In a dissenting opinion, Justices Stephen G. Breyer, Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan expressed incredulity at the court's willingness to frustrate "the federal government's ability to counter the unparalleled threat that Covid-19 poses to our nation's workers."

Regulating safety in the workplace, the three dissenting justices wrote, is precisely what OSHA is commanded to do.

They agreed that the key issue in the case was that of institutional competence to address the health care crisis.

"Underlying everything else in this dispute," they wrote, "is a single, simple question: Who decides how much protection, and of what kind, American workers need from Covid-19? An agency with expertise in workplace health and safety, acting as Congress and the president authorized? Or a court, lacking any knowledge of how to safeguard workplaces, and insulated from responsibility for any damage it causes?" The wiser course, they wrote, would have been to defer to OSHA.

"In the face of a still-raging pandemic, this court tells the agency charged with protecting worker safety that it may not do so in all the workplaces needed," the dissenters wrote of the majority's actions in the case, *National Federation of Independent Business v. Department of Labor*, No. 21A244. "As disease and death continue to mount, this court tells the agency that it cannot respond in the most effective way possible."

OSHA issued the mandate in November, making exceptions for workers with religious objections and those who do not come into close contact with other people at their jobs. [The administration estimated](#) that it would cause 22 million people to get vaccinated and prevent 250,000 hospitalizations.

The ruling means that companies across the country must now decide between protecting employees, potentially losing staff members resistant to complying and running afoul of patchwork regulations.

Several major companies, like United Airlines and Tyson Foods, already have mandates, while others had held back and waited for legal battles to be resolved. Some companies have been anxious about losing employees at a time when workers are already scarce. While firms with mandates have said those worries largely have not come to fruition, a national requirement could have helped ease those concerns.

Walmart, Amazon and JPMorgan Chase, three of the largest employers in the United States, have yet to issue broad requirements for their workers. Some companies that have waited have cited concerns about the costs of setting up testing programs and pushback from unvaccinated employees.

That second mandate applies to workers at hospitals and other health care facilities that participate in the Medicare and Medicaid programs.

Federal judges in Missouri and Louisiana had blocked the requirement, which has exemptions for people with medical or religious objections, in rulings that applied in about half of the states. It will now go into effect nationwide.

In an unsigned opinion in the case, *Biden v. Missouri*, No. 21A240, the majority wrote that the health care mandate issued by the secretary of health and human services "falls within the authorities that Congress has conferred upon him."

The governing statute gives the secretary the general power to issue regulations to ensure the "efficient administration" of the Medicare and Medicaid programs, and parts of the statute concerning various kinds of facilities generally also authorize the secretary to impose requirements to protect the health and safety of patients.

The majority wrote that the mandate "fits neatly within the language of the statute."

The majority added that facilities that receive money from the Medicare and Medicaid programs must comply with many federal health and safety requirements.

“All this is perhaps why health care workers and public health organizations overwhelmingly support the secretary’s rule,” the majority wrote. “Indeed, their support suggests that a vaccination requirement under these circumstances is a straightforward and predictable example of the ‘health and safety’ regulations that Congress has authorized the secretary to impose.”

In dissent, Justice Clarence Thomas, joined by Justices Samuel A. Alito Jr., Neil M. Gorsuch and Amy Coney Barrett, wrote that “scattered provisions” in the statute did not justify the mandate.

Without “exceedingly clear” congressional authorization, Justice Thomas wrote, the federal government should not be allowed to force health care workers “to choose between losing their livelihoods and acquiescing to a vaccine they have rejected for months.”

“These cases are not about the efficacy or importance of Covid-19 vaccines,” he wrote. “They are only about whether” the agency “has the statutory authority to force health care workers, by coercing their employers, to undergo a medical procedure they do not want and cannot undo.”

The Supreme Court has repeatedly upheld state vaccine mandates in a variety of settings against constitutional challenges. The two cases decided on Thursday concerned a different question, that of whether Congress has authorized the executive branch to institute the requirements.

The majority opinion in the case on health care workers seemed to try to harmonize the two rulings.

“The challenges posed by a global pandemic do not allow a federal agency to exercise power that Congress has not conferred upon it,” the opinion said. “At the same time, such unprecedented circumstances provide no grounds for limiting the exercise of authorities the agency has long been recognized to have.”

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HEADLINE	01/13 Businesses whipsawed on vaccine mandate
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/13/business/stock-market-economy-news#osha-vaccine-mandate-businesses
GIST	<p>A requirement that large companies mandate vaccines or weekly testing for workers was blocked by the Supreme Court on Thursday, leaving the often fraught choice up to employers.</p> <p>Parts of the rule, which the Occupational Safety and Health Administration issued in November, had been scheduled to take effect on Monday.</p> <p>Vaccine mandates have been a controversial approach to battling the pandemic. United Airlines and Tyson Foods are among the major companies that already have such requirements, but many others are waiting for legal battles to be resolved.</p> <p>Walmart, Amazon and JPMorgan Chase, three of the largest private employers in the United States, have yet to issue broad requirements for their staff. A spokesman for Macy’s, which began to request the vaccination status of its employees this month, said the retailer was “evaluating this late breaking development.”</p> <p>Some companies with vaccine mandates said keeping those policies might become more difficult in light of the Supreme Court’s ruling.</p> <p>Franz Spielvogel, who owns Laughing Planet, a chain of fast casual restaurants with more than 200 employees, required his employees to be fully vaccinated or submit to weekly testing by mid-January and</p>

does not plan to change that rule. But the Supreme Court's decision frustrated him, he said, because he no longer has federal cover to justify his policy.

"It turns into a bit of a head scratcher for us," Mr. Spielvogel said, though the recent surge of Covid-19 cases has made him feel more strongly about the need for a mandate. "As a business owner and as an employer and as someone dealing with the public, I want my customers to know they're walking into a safe place."

In a November poll of 543 companies by the consulting firm Willis Towers Watson, 57 percent said they either required or planned to require Covid-19 vaccinations. That included 32 percent that planned to mandate vaccines only if the OSHA rule takes effect. Seven percent said they planned to carry it out regardless of the outcome. A little more than 70 percent of the adult U.S. population [is fully vaccinated](#).

"Our recent survey suggests that many more employers would have pursued vaccine mandates if the rule was left in place," Dr. Jeffrey Levin-Scherz, who leads the consulting firm's clinical response to the coronavirus, said in a statement.

Some companies have been concerned about losing employees when workers are already scarce, and although firms with mandates have said those concerns have largely not come to fruition, a national requirement could have further eased those concerns.

The National Retail Federation, which was one of several trade groups to [sue the administration over the mandate](#), called the Supreme Court's action a "significant victory for employers." The organization said it "urges the Biden administration to discard this unlawful mandate and instead work with employers, employees and public health experts on practical ways to increase vaccination rates and mitigate the spread of the virus in 2022."

Companies have been preparing for months for the mandate, and many may still go forward with their policies, said Douglas Brayley, an employment lawyer at Ropes & Gray. He noted that the Supreme Court did not say anything against employer vaccination mandates.

Some local and state laws still require employers to mandate vaccines or weekly testing. New York City, for example, has a more stringent rule than the federal government's, requiring all on-site workers to be vaccinated. The Supreme Court has repeatedly upheld state vaccine mandates, and it did not limit the ability of employers to create their own requirements.

But other states have laws blocking mask and vaccine mandates, which the federal rule would have preempted. With the Biden administration's rule blocked, many employers in those states will be unable to require vaccines, said David Michaels, an epidemiologist and a professor at George Washington University and a former OSHA administrator.

"This decision will be an excuse for those employers who care less about their employees to return to business as usual," Dr. Michaels said. He added that the decision could exacerbate the divide between white-collar workers who can remain at home and workers who have to conduct business in person as Covid cases surge.

The Supreme Court's decision, which described OSHA's rule as "a blunt instrument," left open the possibility that the agency could issue a revised rule that is targeted at certain types of workplaces or is more clearly within its purview, such as requiring improved ventilation and personal protective equipment, Dr. Michaels said. It could also follow a more traditional rule-making process rather than the emergency one it used, though that could take years.

In the meantime, the court's ruling could encourage states and local governments to go forward with their own requirements. That could create further complications for national employers.

	<p>“Local jurisdictions are going to look more carefully at the OSHA mandate and determine whether to adopt something similar,” said Domenique Camacho Moran, a partner in the labor and employment practice at the law firm Farrell Fritz.</p> <p>United Airlines said this week that while 3,000 of its employees had Covid-19, none of its vaccinated employees were currently hospitalized. Since its vaccine policy went into effect, the airline said, its employee hospitalization rate had dropped significantly below the rate for the U.S. population.</p> <p>Dr. Megan Ranney, an emergency physician and the associate dean at Brown University’s School of Public Health, called the ruling a “tremendous blow” to national efforts to battle the pandemic.</p> <p>“There is 30 percent of the movable adult population” that isn’t vaccinated for which a mandate may have made a difference, she said. “Now, the mandates are not going to be in place, and so I worry that those folks are going to continue to not get vaccinated — unless an awful lot of employers decide that this is in their best interest to put in place.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 Wall St turbulence: stocks drop late sell-off
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/13/business/stock-market-economy-news#us-stock-market-today
GIST	<p>Stocks tumbled on Thursday in a late sell-off led by shares of technology companies, ending two days of relative calm on Wall Street.</p> <p>The S&P 500 fell 1.4 percent, while the Nasdaq composite slid 2.5 percent, losses that wiped out gains made by both benchmarks over the past two days.</p> <p>Thursday’s trading echoed a wave of selling that hit markets last week, with large technology weighing on the broad market. Tesla, one of the biggest companies in the S&P 500, was one of the worst performers in the index, falling 6.8 percent. Microsoft fell 4.2 percent, Amazon dropped 2.4 percent, and Apple and Google slid about 2 percent.</p> <p>The Nasdaq is down more than 5 percent this year, and the S&P 500 is down more than 2 percent, a decline that has come as investors adjust their expectations for interest rates in the year ahead as the Federal Reserve looks to get inflation under control and cuts its support for the economy.</p> <p>The central bank is already slowing its bond-buying program, and it has signaled that it could soon raise interest rates and begin to shrink its asset holdings in a bid to further cool off the economy.</p> <p>“We have a set of tools — they are very effective — and we will use them to bring inflation back down,” Lael Brainard, a Fed governor whom President Biden has nominated to become the central bank’s vice chair, said on Thursday at a Senate hearing. Economists expect the Fed to begin raising interest rates as soon as March.</p> <p>Rising interest rates discourage risk-taking by investors, which tends to hit tech stocks more than others. What’s more, shares of many technology companies trade at high valuations because of fast growth and expectations that they will produce significant profits in the future. But higher interest rates put future growth in doubt and make those future earnings worth less to current investors.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 New virus cases slow in first-hit cities
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/us/omicron-cases-us.html
GIST	<p>At another bleak moment of the pandemic in the United States — with nearly 800,000 new cases a day, deaths rising and federal medical teams deploying to overwhelmed hospitals — glints of progress have finally started to emerge. In a handful of places that were among the first to see a surge of the Omicron variant last month, reports of new coronavirus infections have started to level off or decline.</p>

Daily case reports have been falling rapidly around Cleveland, Newark and Washington, D.C., each of which sustained record-shattering spikes over the past month. There were also early signs in [Chicago](#), [New York](#), [Puerto Rico](#) and hard-hit ski resort towns in Colorado that cases were hitting a plateau or starting to drop.

The slowing of the spread in those places was welcome news, raising the prospect that a national peak in the Omicron wave may be approaching. But most of the country continued to see explosive growth in virus cases, with some Western and Southern states reporting 400 percent increases over the past two weeks. Officials also warned that hospitalizations and deaths lag actual infections, meaning that even in places where new cases have begun declining, it would still be weeks before the full impact of Omicron was known.

“We’re very far from being out of the woods,” said Dr. Bruce Vanderhoff, the director of the Ohio Department of Health, who [told reporters that he was encouraged](#) by early indications of a downturn in parts of his state. But he warned: “If we’ve learned one thing about Covid it’s that it is extraordinarily unpredictable. And things can change dramatically and quickly.”

It was just seven weeks ago that scientists in South Africa alerted the world to the fast-spreading Omicron variant, and just [a month ago](#) that the variant started to gain a foothold in the United States. As cases have soared to record levels in the days since, scientists have found that Omicron tends to cause less severe illness in many people than prior forms of the virus, and that vaccines, though less protective against infection, continue to provide robust defense against critical illness and death.

Still, the speed and scale of the Omicron surge has disrupted American life and taxed a health care system that was already strained by an autumn uptick driven by the Delta variant. Across the country, more than 1,800 deaths are being announced each day, a rise of about 50 percent over the past two weeks. Colleges and some school districts [have returned to online instruction](#), bus routes have been disrupted after drivers tested positive and health care systems have struggled with an uptick of cases among employees.

In Wisconsin, Gov. Tony Evers said on Thursday that National Guard members would train as nursing assistants and then deploy to short-staffed nursing homes. In Omaha, where the Nebraska attorney general [sued the county health director over a new mask mandate](#), a major hospital said it was [activating a crisis plan](#) that would limit appointments and reschedule surgeries because of surging caseloads. And at a small hospital in Canton, S.D., officials said, four of the eight nurses who would usually be treating patients on the floor were out with the virus at one point last week.

“What we’re bracing for right now is really doing everything we can to avoid a work force shortage,” said Dr. Jeremy Cauwels, the chief physician for Sanford Health, in the Upper Midwest, where more than 400 employees across the hospital system were off work with the virus this week.

Christina Ramirez, a biostatistician at the University of California, Los Angeles, said it was too early to tell where the United States was in its surge. Omicron passed through and peaked in South Africa in about a month, but countries like Denmark and Germany look more like a “jagged sawtooth,” she said.

“You get a couple days where it goes down, goes back up and goes back down.”

“We’ve been fooled by the virus before,” Dr. Ramirez said. “The next couple of weeks will be very telling.”

Even as some cities were seeing new cases slow, reports of infections were continuing to rise sharply nationwide. About 150,000 people with the virus are hospitalized across the country, more than at any previous point of the pandemic. That data includes patients who were hospitalized for other reasons and were found to have Covid.

Several times throughout the pandemic, surges driven by new variants caused cases to rise steadily for a period of time before falling again. Scientists suggest that both biology and behavior help drive that

pattern. When cases rise, people may become more cautious, and as more people get infected, the virus will have more trouble finding susceptible hosts. Because Omicron spreads so quickly, this cycle might be faster than earlier surges.

Complicating experts' understanding of the trajectory of the Omicron surge in the United States have been questions about the reporting of new cases. People have increasingly turned to at-home tests to confirm their infections, and many of those are not counted in official data. But the case trend lines, which as recently as a week ago showed rapid growth almost everywhere in the country, remain helpful in outlining the broad pattern.

In Chicago, Dr. Allison Arwady, the public health commissioner, said on Thursday that she was "much less worried than I was even three, four, five days ago" about the city's outlook. With cases spiking to record levels in Chicago, a labor dispute between City Hall and the teachers' union canceled classes for a week. By Thursday, with school back in session, there were signs that reports of new cases and test positivity may be leveling off, even as hospitalizations continued to increase.

"It is still too early in terms of being able to clearly say this is the peak, we're on the way down," Dr. Arwady said. "But I think we are seeing some signs of certainly flattening across many different metrics."

New York City has averaged about 38,000 new infections a day over the past week, down slightly in recent days but still near the highest rate of the pandemic. Gov. Kathy Hochul of New York said this week that it "looks like we may be cresting over that peak," but that transmission remained high.

At University Hospital in Newark, the number of patients with Covid has held about steady at 150 for the past five days. Dr. Shereef Elnahal, the president and chief executive of the hospital, said he was hopeful that the rapid spike in hospitalizations since late December had finally leveled off.

"With all the caveats, God willing, knock on wood, we are beginning to see a plateau in daily hospitalizations," Dr. Elnahal said.

Those trends are more pronounced in some other cities. In San Juan, P.R., reports of new cases are down 17 percent in the past two weeks. In the [county that includes Cleveland](#), new case reports have plunged 49 percent in two weeks. [Washington, D.C.](#), is averaging 1,700 new cases a day, down from an early-January peak of more than 2,100.

"I believe it's a true leveling off, though still with horrendous rates of transmission," said Dr. Lynn Goldman, dean of the Milken Institute School of Public Health at George Washington University.

The slowing of cases in some places did not ease the immediate crisis in many of the country's hospitals. President Biden said on Thursday that he was sending 120 additional military medical personnel to six states — Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio and Rhode Island — where hospitals had been overrun.

Mr. Biden also said he was directing his staff to purchase an additional 500 million at-home coronavirus tests for distribution to Americans, doubling the government's previous purchase. It remained unclear when the first of those tests would be available.

Omicron began to surge before Christmas in urban centers in the eastern half of the country, including many of the places where daily caseloads have recently started to fall. But much of the United States, particularly the West and in rural portions of the South and Midwest, did not see a similar spike until around New Year's. In those regions, daily cases continue to rise swiftly.

In [Oregon](#) and [Utah](#), new case reports have increased more than 450 percent in the past two weeks. [Los Angeles County, Calif.](#), is averaging about 40,000 cases a day, up from 25,000 a week ago and 5,500 before Christmas. [Arkansas](#), which was averaging fewer than 1,000 cases a day before Christmas, is now

reporting more than 7,000 a day. In [Louisiana](#), cases and hospitalizations are both up more than 200 percent over the past two weeks.

“This is not forever,” Gov. John Bel Edwards of Louisiana said. “At some point, we will peak out in this surge as we have previously and we’re going to start coming down the other side, but quite frankly we’re not there yet.”

Whenever the Omicron wave finally recedes, it is uncertain how much protection the nation might have against future outbreaks — whether small and sporadic or more widespread surges.

“I think that’s the million-dollar question,” said Bertha Hidalgo, an epidemiologist at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. “I would hope that we would not see a new variant of concern quickly and the immunity we build to Omicron is long-lasting.”

Evidence from prior variants suggests that immunity from natural infection only lasts so long, Dr. Hidalgo added.

Across the country, officials in places with hopeful glimmers in their data were adopting a cautious approach to interpreting those numbers.

Dr. Ngozi Ezike, the director of the Illinois Department of Public Health, said on Wednesday that it was “too soon to tell” whether the worst of Omicron had passed in her state. Hospitalizations statewide had declined slightly on one recent day, but it was unclear whether that would become a trend.

“You really want to see a consistent decline,” Dr. Ezike said. “I will be the first to announce it when we can say that pretty confidently. Crossing my fingers and toes, but I just don’t want to get ahead of ourselves.”

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HEADLINE	01/13 Federal govt. to buy additional 500M tests
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/13/world/biden-covid-19-speech#covid-tests-biden
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — President Biden on Thursday stepped up his administration’s response to a coronavirus surge driven by the Omicron variant, sending what he said is urgently needed help to overwhelmed hospitals and pledging to provide Americans with free tests and masks as the country enters the pandemic’s third year.</p> <p>Mr. Biden said he was directing his staff to purchase an additional 500 million tests for distribution to Americans, doubling the government’s previous purchase as his administration scrambles to respond to the highly contagious Omicron.</p> <p>In addition, the president said he is sending a total of 120 military medical personnel to six states where hospitals have been overrun by cases. And he promised to reveal next week plans to help Americans by providing free, high-quality masks that are better at preventing infection from the virus.</p> <p>It is unclear when the additional tests will become available. Mr. Biden announced the first batch of 500 million tests just before Christmas, and those will not start being delivered until later this month, according to White House officials.</p> <p>The president did not say when the new batch of 500 million tests will be manufactured and ready for distribution. But he said the at-home tests — along with more than 20,000 testing sites around the country — will help to meet the surging demand as people try to continue work, school and social life despite the rapid spread of the virus.</p> <p>“We’re on track to roll out a website next week where you can order free test shipped to your home,” he said, adding that people with medical insurance can also soon get reimbursed for the purchase of up to eight tests a month.</p>

	<p>Mr. Biden also did not provide any details about what he said would be a plan to ensure that Americans have access to high-quality masks, such as the KN95 and N95 face coverings.</p> <p>The announcement about help for hospitals was the beginning of a deployment of 1,000 service members to help doctors and nurses deal with a surge in Omicron cases, Mr. Biden said.</p> <p>The new teams of doctors, nurses and other medical personnel would begin arriving at hospitals in Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio and Rhode Island, the president said. They will help triage patients arriving at hospitals, allowing short-staffed emergency departments to free up space.</p> <p>Each of those states has suffered an astronomical rise in known cases, already exceeding the previous nationwide peak per capita reached last winter, according to a New York Times database.</p> <p>The deployments are part of the Biden administration's efforts to tackle the latest surge of Omicron cases, which have reached more than 780,000 a day across the country. The number of Americans hospitalized with Covid-19 has hit a record high of about 142,000.</p> <p>Research has emerged that Omicron causes less severe disease and vaccines remain protective against the worst outcomes for the vast majority of people. Still, experts say that the sheer number of cases are likely to burden health care systems already strained by previous surges and grappling with staffing shortages.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 Puerto Rico booster shots for students
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/13/world/biden-covid-19-speech#puerto-rico-will-require-booster-shots-for-students-12-and-older
GIST	<p>Gov. Pedro Pierluisi of Puerto Rico signed an executive order Thursday requiring students 12 and older to get booster shots by Feb. 15 to be considered fully vaccinated and learn in-person.</p> <p>The order comes during an onslaught of cases driven by the Omicron variant and as the island has reported more Covid-related deaths in the past week than in any other seven-day period.</p> <p>An earlier order by Mr. Pierluisi required everyone who works in education and health to receive a booster shot by Saturday.</p> <p>He said the measure was “to minimize contagion and allow students to continue face-to-face classes.” (Mr. Pierluisi recently delayed the reopening of schools for two weeks amid the surge.) The order applies to all students at public or private institutions, including those at colleges or technical schools.</p> <p>If students qualify for a medical or religious exemption, they will have to get weekly tests or submit proof of recent infection and recovery within the previous three months. Remote learning or other alternative methods are also options, he said. Students 5 and older had to get their first dose by Monday, Jan. 10, The Associated Press reports.</p> <p>“We all have to be part of the solution,” he wrote on Twitter on Thursday.</p> <p>The requirement, and deadline, also extend to people who work in hotels, theater, cinemas and other public-facing businesses. There are more than 900 vaccination sites around Puerto Rico, Mr. Pierluisi wrote on Twitter. He urged employers to allow workers to get vaccinated during work, and to permit them to take time off if they experienced side effects.</p> <p>Mr. Pierluisi also put out an executive order on Thursday limiting commercial activity from midnight to 5 a.m. through Feb. 2, and banned sales of alcohol during that time.</p>

	<p>Businesses where people have to remove their masks, like restaurants and bars, must remain at 50 percent capacity indoors and 75 percent capacity outdoors.</p> <p>More than 73 percent of the island is fully vaccinated, according to data from The New York Times. The island of 3.3 million is averaging 8,703 cases a day, a 49 percent increase from two weeks ago.</p> <p>Hospitalizations are also high, which Mr. Pierluisi attributed to the Omicron variant. Almost 800 patients are in wards with coronavirus infections, a 293 percent increase from two weeks ago.</p> <p>“We need to take care of each other so we can overcome this new challenge together,” Mr. Pierluisi wrote on Twitter.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 NYC nurses issue public cry for help
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/13/world/biden-covid-19-speech#its-too-much-nurses-say-nyc-hospitals-are-overrun-with-covid-patients
GIST	<p>Nurses at overwhelmed public hospitals in New York City issued a public cry for help on Thursday, describing overrun emergency rooms, hospital floors filled to capacity, and nurses running themselves ragged as they struggle to take care of a surging patient load with fewer staff.</p> <p>“Patients are lying in the hallway on stretchers that are touching each other,” said Karen Lam, an emergency room nurse at Jacobi Medical Center in the Bronx, where nurses held a news conference and demonstration on Thursday to draw attention to the conditions. “And if the patients are Covid positive, we pack four to five of them in an isolation room that was originally only meant to hold two patients.”</p> <p>In recent days, she said, between 30 to 40 admitted patients have been boarding in the emergency room, sometimes for days, while waiting for a bed to free up upstairs. Nurses are asked to care for these patients in addition to the flood of new arrivals in the emergency room. Nurses and doctors at other hospitals have described similar scenes as Omicron has surged through New York City.</p> <p>“It’s too much,” Ms. Lam said. “I’m just exhausted, in tears and feeling guilty, because I know under these working conditions, I cannot possibly provide these patients with the care that they deserve.”</p> <p>Hospitalizations of patients with Covid-19 are still rising in New York City, even though the pace of their increase is beginning to slow as the Omicron wave appears to crest. The intensity of this surge has slammed into hospitals whose ranks were already thinned by attrition over the pandemic. The virus intensified the staff shortages by sickening staff members and leaving the ones still working to handle many more patients than they usually do.</p> <p>In New York City, the 11 public hospitals, and about a dozen safety-net independent hospitals that rely on Medicaid for their revenue, are particularly strained because they started out with fewer resources. Not enough reinforcements have arrived, in part because even the major hospital systems are overstretched, and because the state has focused its available National Guard personnel on even more stressed health systems in upstate New York.</p> <p>The N.Y.C. Health and Hospitals Corporation, which runs the city’s public hospitals, said Thursday that its nurses’ voices were being heard. More than 800 nursing and clinical staff were being added to supplement those out sick; 2,500 patients have been transferred across its facilities to balance patient loads; and virus testing vans had been deployed outside of most city hospitals to alleviate the crush in their emergency departments, a spokesman said.</p> <p>On Thursday, President Biden announced the deployment of military medical teams to six states hit hard by Omicron, including New York. Two teams of about 20 members each will be going to two New York City public hospitals — Coney Island Hospital in Brooklyn and North Central in the Bronx, Gov. Kathy Hochul’s office said.</p>

	<p>Governor Hochul has requested that the federal government send an additional 800 clinical staff to mobilize strike teams across the state, her office said. Two other federal teams are already helping at hospitals in Buffalo and Rochester.</p> <p>Nurses on Thursday described their frustration with political leaders that they said were not doing enough to slow the surge in patients, despite the overtaxed hospitals. They also blasted the new federal guideline calling on hospital staff to return to work five days after testing positive for Covid, saying that they felt patient safety was being compromised.</p> <p>“It just feels like we are so desperately trying to seek normalcy without remembering that, again, our hospitals were not designed for this type of situation,” said Kelley Cabrera, another emergency room nurse at Jacobi.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 Scores condemn attacks against Dr. Fauci
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/13/world/biden-covid-19-speech#fauci-smear-campaign
GIST	<p>More than 200 leading American doctors and scientists — including four Nobel Prize winners and a former Republican leader — have signed an open letter in support of Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, calling Republican attacks on him “inaccurate, unscientific, ill-founded in the facts and, increasingly, motivated by partisan politics.”</p> <p>Dr. Fauci, who has led the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases since 1984 and is now President Biden’s top medical adviser for Covid-19, has repeatedly clashed with congressional Republicans, and particularly with two who are fellow physicians: Senator Rand Paul, Republican of Kentucky, and Senator Roger Marshall, Republican of Kansas.</p> <p>The tensions took an extraordinary turn on Tuesday, when Dr. Fauci — who has been the subject of death threats — publicly accused the senators of fomenting threats of violence against him and his family. He said his children had received obscene phone calls, and he noted the recent arrest of an armed man in Iowa who said he was driving to Washington to kill public figures including Mr. Biden and Dr. Fauci.</p> <p>“Physicians trying to work for the country are outraged by Tony’s treatment — the innuendo, smear campaign,” said Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel, a bioethicist at the University of Pennsylvania who organized the letter, referring to Dr. Fauci by his nickname. “It is reminiscent of Joe McCarthy attacking people without any basis and ruining them, in this case inciting others to violence.”</p> <p>Dr. Emanuel said the clash at Tuesday’s hearing prompted the statement of support, and that neither Dr. Fauci or the Biden administration knew about the effort.</p> <p>Among the signatories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr. Bill Frist, a former Senate Republican leader from Tennessee. • Dr. Harvey Alter, an immunologist who helped discover the Hepatitis C virus, and winner of a Nobel Prize. • Dr. David Baltimore, a biologist who discovered how tumor viruses integrate themselves into cells, and Nobel winner. • Dr. Harold Varmus, a former director of the National Institutes of Health who helped discover virus genes that cause cancer, and Nobel winner. • Dr. William Kaelin, whose work has unraveled the mystery of how the body adapts to changing levels of oxygen, and Nobel winner. <p>Dr. Fauci, they wrote, “has served the U.S.A. with wisdom and integrity for nearly 40 years,” guiding the nation through a series of infectious disease crises, including H.I.V., Ebola and now Covid-19. “He has our unreserved respect and trust as a scientist and a national leader,” the statement said.</p>

Presidents from both parties have long treated Dr. Fauci with deference and respect. He worked closely with President George W. Bush to develop an international program to combat AIDS, and he was close with Mr. Bush's father, the first President Bush. But President Donald J. Trump apparently did not like Dr. Fauci's blunt advice, and repeatedly threatened to fire him.

Other Republicans have since climbed on the anti-Fauci bandwagon. Mr. Paul, an ophthalmologist, has repeatedly accused Dr. Fauci of using N.I.H. money to support studies in Wuhan, China, of how viruses could be made more transmissible. Dr. Fauci has steadfastly denied it. "Senator Paul, you do not know what you are talking about, quite frankly," [he said at a hearing](#) in July.

On Tuesday, Dr. Fauci accused Mr. Paul of trying to raise campaign contributions by whipping up sentiment against him, and he appeared to call Mr. Marshall a "moron" under his breath — a comment that was picked up by an open microphone — after Mr. Marshall insinuated, [incorrectly](#), that Dr. Fauci was hiding his financial disclosure forms.

"Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic," the doctors' and scientists' statement said, "Dr. Fauci has provided the American political leadership and the public with sagacious counsel in these most difficult of times. His advice has been as well-informed as data and the rapidly evolving circumstances allowed."

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HEADLINE	01/13 College enrollment continues decline
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/13/world/biden-covid-19-speech#college-enrollment-2021-omicron
GIST	<p>The enrollment crisis at U.S. institutions of higher learning continued a second year into the pandemic, even as coronavirus vaccines became widely available for students last fall, according to the latest numbers from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.</p> <p>Total undergraduate enrollment dropped 3.1 percent from the fall of 2020 to the fall of 2021, bringing the total decline since the fall of 2019 to 6.6 percent — or 1,205,600 students.</p> <p>"Our final look at fall 2021 enrollment shows undergraduates continuing to sit out in droves as colleges navigate yet another year of Covid-19," said Doug Shapiro, the executive director of the research center, which collects and analyzes data from 3,600 postsecondary institutions.</p> <p>Even before the pandemic, college enrollment was declining nationally as the number of college-age students leveled off. At the same time, high tuition costs discouraged prospective domestic students, and the highly polarizing immigration debate drove away international students.</p> <p>That decline then accelerated steeply when Covid-19 forced many classes online and restricted campus life. The economic disruption caused by the pandemic also forced many prospective college students into the workplace.</p> <p>The new figures show that undergraduate enrollment declined at every type of college, but public two-year colleges remain the hardest-hit, with U.S. community colleges disproportionately hurt.</p> <p>Tens of thousands of students, many of them low-income, were forced to delay school or drop out because of the pandemic and the economic crisis it has created. The new data showed that enrollment in community colleges was down 13.2 percent, or 706,000 students, compared with 2019.</p> <p>The number of students seeking associate degrees at four-year institutions also fell, as did the number of students aged 24 and over.</p> <p>"Without a dramatic re-engagement in their education, the potential loss to these students' earnings and futures is significant, which will greatly impact the nation as a whole in years to come," Mr. Shapiro said in a news release.</p>

	<p>There was one bright spot in the data: The enrollment of first-year students stabilized, up about 0.4 percent, or 8,100 students, from 2020 to 2021.</p> <p>Even so, first-year enrollment is 9.2 percent lower than prepandemic levels in fall 2019.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 Iraq to bar unvaccinated entering country
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/13/world/biden-covid-19-speech#iraq-plans-to-bar-unvaccinated-people-from-entering-the-country
GIST	<p>BAGHDAD — Iraq’s government says it plans to bar anyone who is not fully vaccinated against the coronavirus from entering the country, including Iraqis and religious pilgrims.</p> <p>“All arrivals to Iraq, both Iraqis and foreigners, must present Covid-19 vaccination cards” with a QR code showing evidence of at least two vaccine doses, the country’s top coronavirus panel said in a list of recommendations announced on Wednesday.</p> <p>The measures were adopted after a meeting chaired by Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi. It was not immediately clear when the rules would come into effect. Also uncertain was whether the government planned to deny entry completely to returning Iraqis, a move that would contravene fundamental citizens’ rights, or whether it would subject them to other measures such as mandatory isolation.</p> <p>In addition to proof of vaccination, travelers to Iraq will continue to have to present proof of a negative P.C.R. test taken within 72 hours of arrival.</p> <p>The government panel, the Iraqi Supreme Committee for National Health and Safety, noted that the requirements would apply to religious pilgrims. Pilgrims, most of whom are Iranians visiting some of the holiest sites in Shiite Islam, have previously been allowed to enter Iraq without proof of vaccination. Like other travelers, they have been required to show a negative P.C.R. test.</p> <p>About eight million of Iraq’s population of 42 million have received at least one vaccine dose. The country has provided third doses to older people and to the medically vulnerable. Iraqis mistrustful of their government and of coronavirus vaccines have been hesitant to get inoculated, and mask wearing and social distancing in the country are rare.</p> <p>The committee also said that it would require federal government ministries to enforce existing rules requiring employees to present proof of vaccination and that it was asking the national security agency to crack down on forged vaccination cards.</p> <p>The Iraqi Health Ministry on Wednesday reiterated a call for people to wear masks and avoid social gatherings, but it has not introduced fines or other measures to ensure compliance. The Baghdad municipality also on Wednesday announced that working hours for its employees would be cut in half because of concerns about a new wave of the virus.</p> <p>Iraq has recorded more than two million coronavirus cases and more than 24,000 deaths since the pandemic began.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 Viruses don’t always become less virulent
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/debunking-idea-viruses-evolve-virulent/story?id=82052581
GIST	<p>As evidence mounts that the omicron variant is less deadly than prior COVID-19 strains, one oft-cited explanation is that viruses always evolve to become less virulent over time.</p> <p>The problem, experts say, is that this theory has been soundly debunked.</p>

The idea that infections tend to become less lethal over time was first proposed by notable bacteriologist Dr. Theobald Smith in the late 1800s. His [theory](#) about pathogen evolution was later dubbed the "law of declining virulence."

Simple and elegant, Smith's theory was that to ensure their own survival, pathogens evolve to stop killing their human hosts. Instead, they create only a mild infection, allowing people to walk around, spreading the virus further afield. Good for the virus, and, arguably, good for us.

But over the past 100 years, virologists have learned that virus evolution is more chaotic. Virus evolution is a game of chance, and less about grand design.

In some cases, viruses evolve to become more virulent.

Continued virus survival, spread and virulence are all about the evolutionary pressures of multiple factors, including the number of people available to infect, how long humans live after infection, the immune system response and time between infection and symptom onset.

Unfortunately, that means it's nearly impossible to predict the future of the pandemic, because viruses don't always evolve in a predictable pattern.

There have been thousands of identified COVID variants, each with unique mutations. But most new variants emerge and then quickly die out, unable to compete with the reigning dominant variant.

Some variants, however, have clear "advantages to continued survival, such as those that evade the immune system and spread easily," said Dr. Abir Hussein, associate medical director for infection presentation and control at University of Washington Medical Center.

Experts warn that it is important to assess the severity of omicron in the context of existing immunity through vaccines and prior infections.

"It is difficult to determine with new variants like delta and omicron if variants are evolving to be more or less virulent. This is because these variants emerged at a time when we had a good deal of immunity to SARS-CoV-2 in certain countries," said Andrew Pekosz, a professor of microbiology at Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health.

People who are vaccinated or recently infected will have milder symptoms if they experience a breakthrough infection or a reinfection, studies show.

"This is not because the variant is less virulent, but because your immune system was primed from prior vaccination and infection," said Pekosz.

Experts say omicron should not be taken lightly or thought of as a less lethal form of COVID. Even if less deadly, the omicron variant is also significantly more transmissible, leading to more deaths overall.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention predict that 22,000 more people could die of COVID-19 over the next two weeks.

People who are unvaccinated remain significantly more at-risk, with [officials estimating](#) they are 17 times more likely to be hospitalized and 20 times more likely to die of COVID-19 compared to people who are vaccinated.

"The available COVID vaccines provide immunity for a range of variants and continue to be the first line of defense," said Dr. John Brownstein, chief innovation officer at Boston Children's Hospital and an ABC News contributor.

	As for the future of the pandemic, experts say new variants may emerge in the future, but they won't be easy to predict.
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HEADLINE	01/13 Stalemate: India, China border standoff
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/india-china-talks-border-standoff-end-stalemate-82243322
GIST	<p>NEW DELHI -- Talks between Indian and Chinese military commanders on easing a 20-month border standoff ended without a breakthrough for the second time in three months, an Indian Defense Ministry official said Thursday.</p> <p>The ministry said in a statement that the two sides had a “frank and in-depth exchange of views” in the meeting on China’s side of the Molde meeting point on Wednesday and would work to resolve the remaining issues, without specifying them.</p> <p>The previous round of commander-level talks in October also ended in a stalemate, with China accusing India of sticking to “unreasonable and unrealistic demands, adding difficulties to the negotiations.”</p> <p>India and China have stationed tens of thousands of soldiers backed by artillery, tanks and fighter jets along their de facto border, called the Line of Actual Control. In 2020, 20 Indian troops were killed in a clash with Chinese soldiers involving clubs, stones and fists. China said it lost four soldiers.</p> <p>Indian army chief Manoj Mukund Naravane on Wednesday described the current situation in eastern Ladakh as “stable and under control” but told reporters in New Delhi that India would continue to deal with China in a “firm and resolute” manner.</p> <p>Asked about the comment on Thursday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said in Beijing that China hopes “the certain individual from India can avoid making such unconstructive comments.”</p> <p>Since February last year, India and China have withdrawn troops from some sites on the northern and southern banks of Pangong Tso, Gogra and Galwan Valley, but continue to maintain extra forces as part of a multitier deployment.</p> <p>The Line of Actual Control separates Chinese and Indian-held territories from Ladakh in the west to India’s eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, which China claims in its entirety. India and China fought a war over the border in 1962.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 Russia troops begin to depart Kazakhstan
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/russian-troops-begin-leaving-kazakhstan-government-restores-control/story?id=82243668
GIST	<p>Russian-led troops sent to help Kazakhstan’s government quell violent protests have begun leaving the country, according to Russia’s defense minister.</p> <p>Roughly 2,300 troops were dispatched to Kazakhstan last week by a Moscow-dominated alliance of former Soviet countries, after Kazakhstan’s president appealed for assistance amid the protests that saw his government lose control in the country’s biggest city, Almaty.</p> <p>Kazakhstan’s government has since re-established its grip after its security forces forcibly ended the unrest, using live fire to clear the streets in Almaty, where over a hundred were killed. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev this week announced the foreign troops from the alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), had completed their mission and could leave now that the situation in the country was stable.</p>

Russia's defense ministry on Thursday said the first Russian paratrooper units had taken off from Almaty. Four Il-76 transports would fly the troops and their equipment to their base in the Russian city Ivanovo, the ministry said.

Sergey Shoigu, Russia's defense minister, said the withdrawal was ongoing and would be completed by Jan. 19. In a televised meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Shoigu said the several hundred troops from other CSTO countries — Tajikistan, Belarus and Armenia — would all leave on Russian aircraft on Friday. A contingent sent from neighboring Kyrgyzstan would leave by land, Shoigu said.

Putin in the meeting said the troops had completed their mission and thanked Russia's military command.

"On the whole we need to return home — we've completed our task," Putin said.

Video published by Kazakh news media on Thursday showed CSTO troops taking part in a farewell ceremony in Kazakhstan, marching on a parade ground at a military institute in Almaty. Photos also showed Russian paratrooper boarding transport planes at the city's airport.

Russia sent the largest contingent from the CSTO alliance, which was established as Moscow's answer to NATO following the fall of the Soviet Union. The deployment was the first time Russia has acted through the alliance to assist a friendly regime against street protests in one of its former Soviet neighbors.

Peaceful protests began in Kazakhstan over fuel prices but they escalated into a violent uprising against Tokayev's regime in the middle of last week. Armed mobs stormed government buildings and there was widespread looting in Almaty. Tokayev and Putin have claimed foreign-backed forces inside the country sought to exploit the unrest to stage an "attempted coup" against Tokayev.

Russia deployed soldiers as well as armored vehicles from the 45th Guards Special Purpose brigade, the 98th Guards Airborne Division and the 31st Separate Guards Order.

The Russian-led troops were not used in combat operations or against protesters, according to Kazakhstan's authorities. Instead the foreign soldiers were used to guard key facilities, freeing up Kazakh security forces to restore order elsewhere, the government said. Russia's defense ministry released video of Russian troops patrolling a power station.

Western countries, worried about Russian intervention in Kazakhstan, expressed concerns about whether Moscow might seek a more permanent presence in the country and whether its independence could be eroded. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken last week told reporters: "One lesson in recent history is that once Russians are in your house, it's sometimes very difficult to get them to leave."

The situation in Kazakhstan has calmed and Tokayev's government appears to be back in control. In Almaty, normal life is returning, although there remains a heavy security presence in the city, according to an ABC reporter there.

Kazakhstan's authorities said they arrested nearly 10,000 people during the protests. The interior ministry on Thursday said 524 people were currently in pre-trial detention and that 412 of them had been charged with offenses relating to the unrest. At least 164 people died, including 18 police officers, and over two thousand were injured, according to the government.

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HEADLINE	01/13 Iran launches test rocket into space
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/report-iran-launched-solid-fuel-satellite-rocket-space-82245006
GIST	TEHRAN, Iran -- Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard last week launched a solid-fuel satellite carrier rocket into space, the country's official IRNA news agency reported Thursday.

The report quoted Gen. Amirali Hajizadeh, chief of the Guard's aerospace unit, as saying the test was successful. He said it marked the first time Iran used a solid-fuel rocket rather than a liquid-fuel one. He said Iran will produce lighter rocket engines in further space projects.

According to the general, the satellite carrier was made of a composite material instead of metal — something he claimed was “cost-efficient.” Hajizadeh spoke to a group of clerics in the city of Qom, the seat of seminaries in Iran. He said Iran strongly pursues its goals in aerospace and satellite industry.

However, composites are in general more expensive to produce than their metal equivalents. Composites also make a rocket lighter so it can boost a heavier satellite or payload into orbit. State TV did not show any footage on the launch.

Satellite carriers usually use liquid fuel but solid-fuel rockets can be adapted for mobile launchers that can be driven anywhere on a major road or rail system. Pure solid-fuel rockets are mostly associated with ballistic missiles systems.

Last month, Iran said it launched a rocket with a satellite carrier bearing three devices into space, without saying whether any of the objects had entered Earth's orbit.

The State Department at the time said it remains concerned by Iran's space launches, which it asserts “pose a significant proliferation concern” in regards to Tehran's ballistic missile program.

The launches come against the backdrop of negotiations in Vienna trying to revive Tehran's tattered nuclear deal with world powers. Iran, which has long said that it does not seek nuclear weapons, insists that its satellite launches and rocket tests do not have a military component.

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HEADLINE	01/13 Sudan anti-coup protests violence; 2 killed
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/sudan-security-forces-fire-tear-gas-anti-coup-82242175
GIST	<p>SHARM EL-SHEIKH, Egypt -- Sudanese security forces fired live ammunition and tear gas to disperse protesters in the capital of Khartoum as thousands took to the streets Thursday against a coup that has plunged the country into grinding deadlock, activists said. A senior police officer and a protester were killed, according to authorities and a medical group.</p> <p>The demonstrations in Khartoum and elsewhere in Sudan are the latest in relentless protests since the military on Oct. 25 ousted the civilian-led government of Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok.</p> <p>The military takeover has upended Sudan's transition to democratic rule after three decades of repression and international isolation under autocratic President Omar al-Bashir. The African nation has been on a fragile path to democracy since a popular uprising forced the military to remove al-Bashir and his Islamist government in April 2019.</p> <p>Demonstrators, mostly young people, marched in different locations in Khartoum and its twin city of Omdurman, according to footage circulated online. Security was tight. There were also protests in the restive western region of Darfur.</p> <p>The protesters demanded the removal of generals from power and the establishment of a fully civilian government to lead the transition.</p> <p>Security forces used tear gas to disperse those marching in a main Khartoum street leading to the fortified presidential palace, according to the pro-democracy movement. Online videos show white smoke — apparently from tear gas — as protesters try to take cover and others hurl stones at the troops.</p>

	<p>The police said a senior officer was killed while providing security to the protest close to the presidential palace. The statement did not say how Col. Ali Hamad was killed, but local media reported that he was stabbed to death as security forces were dispersing the protesters.</p> <p>In Khartoum's Bahri district, a protester was shot and killed and dozens were wounded when security forces intervened with live ammunition to break up the march, according to the Sudan Doctors Committee.</p> <p>More than 60 people have been killed, and hundreds of others injured in the near-daily protests since the coup.</p> <p>The Interior Ministry, which oversees the police, later said a suspect was arrested in Thursday's stabbing attack, which also wounded a number of policemen. Other suspects are being pursued, the ministry added, without elaborating.</p> <p>Idris Abdalla, a police spokesman, told the state-run television that a group of protesters stabbed the colonel. He is the first announced fatality among the security forces since the coup. Police had earlier reported injuries in the protests.</p> <p>The United Nations has repeatedly urged authorities to cease their crackdown on protesters and hold accountable those responsible for killings in previous rounds of protests. The U.N. mission in Sudan began separate consultations earlier this week with Sudanese groups, to try to bridge the widening gap between the military and the pro-democracy movement. These consultations could possibly lead to direct talks between the two sides to find a way out of the crisis.</p> <p>Hamdok, who was the civilian face of Sudan's transitional government in the past two years, resigned earlier this month, citing failure to reach a compromise between the generals and the pro-democracy movement. He had been reinstated in November in a deal with the military that angered the pro-democracy movement.</p> <p>The movement insists that a fully civilian government lead the transition, a demand rejected by the generals who say power will be handed over only to an elected government. Elections are planned in July 2023, in line with a 2019 constitutional document governing the transition period.</p> <p>The coup came a few weeks before the military should have handed over the leadership of the ruling sovereign council to civilians, according to the constitutional document.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 Turkmenistan leader tightens controls
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/turkmen-leader-tightens-controls-unrest-kazakhstan-82249358
GIST	<p>ASHGABAT, Turkmenistan -- Turkmenistan's autocratic leader ordered his government Thursday to tighten controls over the ex-Soviet Central Asian country following massive protests in neighboring Kazakhstan.</p> <p>In televised remarks, President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov told officials to more closely control the internet to "expose and restrict (online) resources that spread false information and damage the country's constitutional order."</p> <p>He also ordered local authorities to tighten the oversight of internal migration flows and make sure that they register all those who move from one region to another.</p> <p>The Turkmen president directed the National Security Ministry to strengthen the protection of the country's citizens from the influence of foreign radical and extremist groups.</p>

	<p>Berdymukhamedov, 64, has ruled the gas-rich desert country since 2006 through an all-encompassing personality cult that styles him as Turkmenistan's "arkadaq," or protector.</p> <p>His statement follows massive protests that rocked the neighboring ex-Soviet nation of Kazakhstan this month.</p> <p>The demonstrations, sparked by public outrage over a sharp rise in fuel prices, quickly engulfed the entire country and descended into violence for several days, with dozens killed in clashes, government buildings stormed and torched and stores looted.</p> <p>Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has blamed the unrest on foreign-backed "terrorists" and requested assistance from the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Russia-led military alliance of six ex-Soviet states. Last week, the bloc sent over 2,000 troops, who began to pull out from Kazakhstan Thursday after Tokayev declared their mission accomplished.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 China didn't send troops into Kazakhstan?
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/explainer-china-send-troops-aid-kazakhstan-82255881
GIST	<p>BEIJING -- China gave strong verbal backing to Kazakhstan's leader for his deadly crackdown to quell violent unrest, but stood aside as Russia sent in special forces troops.</p> <p>Resource-rich Kazakhstan, on China's western border, has economic and strategic importance for Beijing and is an important link in its "Belt and Road" infrastructure initiative to expand its global trade and political influence in rivalry with the U.S. and its allies.</p> <p>China's response to the crisis underscores how it prefers to influence outcomes with verbal assurances and offers of assistance, without committing troops.</p> <p>"The growing closeness between Russia and China means we can expect more rhetorical support for Moscow's overseas ventures, particularly when they go up against Western geostrategic aims," said Rana Mitter, an Oxford University China expert.</p> <p>"However, China remains extremely reluctant to deploy People's Liberation Army troops outside its own territory, except in areas such as U.N. peacekeeping operations, as it would contradict its constant statements that unlike the U.S., China does not intervene in other countries' conflicts," Mitter said.</p> <p>_____</p> <p>WHAT ARE CHINA'S GOALS IN CENTRAL ASIA?</p> <p>Since the demise of the Soviet Union, China has steadily expanded its economic and political influence in a region that Russia considers its own backyard. As the largest and by far the wealthiest Central Asian state, Kazakhstan is key, acting as the buckle in China's "Belt and Road" initiative, and its authoritarian politics act as a bulwark against democratic movements in Ukraine and elsewhere that China derides as Western-engineered "color revolutions."</p> <p>China's ruling Communist Party, which violently repressed its own pro-democracy challenge in 1989, views such movements, whether in Georgia or Hong Kong, as a threat to its own stability. In a message to Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev amid the unrest, Chinese leader Xi Jinping said his country would "resolutely oppose external forces deliberately creating turmoil and instigating a 'color revolution' in Kazakhstan."</p> <p>China's position dovetails with its strident opposition to outside criticism of its policies, whether its human rights record or its expansive territorial claims in the South China Sea, as meddling in its internal affairs.</p>

China's influence in Central Asia still has limits, however, and Kazakhstan may feel uneasy about inviting in Chinese troops, given China's harsh treatment of ethnic Kazakhs and other Muslim minorities within its borders, said Steve Tsang, director of the China Institute at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies.

"An important element of China's foreign policy under Xi is to make the world safe for authoritarian states and stop color revolutions from spreading," Tsang said.

WHEN DOES CHINA INTERVENE?

China frequently vows retaliation for any criticism of its policies, especially when the offenders are the U.S. and its allies. It is far friendlier with autocrats, pledging non-interference and cooperation with whomever is in power, regardless of their records on human rights and corruption.

That's evidenced in its dealings with regimes that others criticize, from Myanmar's military leaders to Hungary's Viktor Orban. While not recognizing the Taliban, it is hedging its bets in Afghanistan by working with the country's current rulers, despite their espousal of the form of radical Islam that Beijing has sought to keep from infiltrating its restive, largely Muslim region of Xinjiang, which shares a narrow border with Afghanistan and a much larger one with Kazakhstan.

China generally reserves action, military and otherwise, for cases in which its own security is perceived as threatened, as in the 1950-53 Korean War, or more recently, in violent incidents along its disputed border with India, and especially with Taiwan, which China threatens to invade if it doesn't agree to unite. Beijing responded with ruthless trade and diplomatic retaliation against Lithuania when the tiny Baltic nation broke with diplomatic convention by allowing Taiwan to open a representative office in Vilnius under the name "Taiwan" instead of "Chinese Taipei."

HOW DOES CHINA VIEW MILITARY ALLIANCES?

Troops, mostly from Russia, were deployed to Kazakhstan last week by the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a grouping of six former Soviet states, at the president's request amid unprecedented violence. China officially eschews such security alliances, although The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which Beijing dominates along with Moscow, has a security component, currently limited to joint training and other non-combat missions.

Unlike the CSTO, there is "no agreement about sending troops from member countries of the SCO," Chinese international security expert Li Wei said. "In addition, China sticks to the fundamental principle of not using force in other countries."

U.N. Peacekeeping Operations remain the rare exception, and China is quick to point out that it is the largest contributor of forces to such missions among the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council.

Given the growing might of China's military, some experts expect Beijing to become more amenable to military interventions in the future. Oxford's Mitter also points to a growing "grey zone" of Chinese private security enterprises that can be used to protect Chinese interests "without any formal government intervention."

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HEADLINE	01/13 China trade surplus surges to record \$676B
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/chinas-trade-surplus-surges-record-6764b-2021-82257349

GIST	<p>BEIJING -- China's politically volatile global trade surplus surged to \$676.4 billion in 2021, likely the highest ever recorded by any country, as exports jumped 29.9% over a year earlier despite semiconductor shortages that disrupted manufacturing.</p> <p>The country's trade surplus in December swelled 20.8% over a year earlier to a monthly record of \$94.4 billion, customs data showed Friday.</p> <p>China piled up a series of monthly export surpluses in 2021 but they prompted less criticism from the United States and other trading partners than in earlier years while they focused on containing coronavirus infections.</p> <p>Exports rose to \$3.3 trillion in 2021 despite shortages of processor chips for smartphones and other products as global demand rebounded from the pandemic. Manufacturers also were hampered by power rationing imposed in some areas.</p> <p>The surplus with the United States, one of the irritants behind a lingering U.S.-Chinese trade war, rose 25.1% in 2021 over a year earlier to \$396.6 billion. Trade envoys have talked since President Joe Biden took office in January but have yet to announce a date to resume face-to-face negotiations.</p> <p>Exports to the United States gained 27.5% over 2020 to \$576.1 billion despite higher tariffs imposed by Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, that still are in place on many goods. Chinese imports of American goods rose 33.1% to \$179.5 billion.</p> <p>Chinese imports in 2021 rose 30.1% to \$2.7 trillion as the world's second-largest economy rebounded from the pandemic.</p> <p>Economic growth weakened in the second half of the year as Beijing carried out a campaign to reduce what it sees as dangerously high debt in the real estate industry, but consumer spending was above pre-pandemic levels.</p> <p>The country's global trade surplus was a 26.4% increase over 2020, which economists said earlier was among the highest ever reported by any economy. They said the only comparison as a percentage of the economy was likely Saudi Arabia and other oil exporters during the 1970s, but their total revenues were smaller.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 Student loan services \$1.7B settlement
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/student-loan-provider-navient-agrees-2b-settlement/story?id=82246180
GIST	<p>Navient, one of the nation's largest student loan services, agreed Thursday to pay nearly \$2 billion to settle claims by 38 states and the District of Columbia it deceived thousands of borrowers into costly, long-term, forbearance plans that caused students to pay more than they should have.</p> <p>"They ran a multi-billion dollar scam," Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro said during a news conference announcing the settlement agreement.</p> <p>Navient, formerly known as Sally Mae, burdened struggling students with debt, the attorneys general said, by pushing them into subprime, private loans they knew most would be unable to repay.</p> <p>"So many people are trapped in unaffordable student loan debt," Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey said. "These loans were doomed to fail from the start and Navient knew it."</p> <p>Navient also steered students into forbearances instead of counseling them about a more affordable repayment plan.</p>

"What Navient did was deceive them," Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson. "All they got was a push into a bad plan, this forbearance plan."

When students stopped making payments, as forbearance allows, the debt piled up. The agreement cancels nearly \$1.7 billion dollars in balances owed by 66,000 borrowers nationwide.

Borrowers receiving private loan debt cancellation will receive a notice from Navient, along with refunds of any payments made on the cancelled private loans after June 30, 2021. Federal loan borrowers who are eligible for a restitution payment of approximately \$260 will receive a postcard in the mail from the settlement administrator later this spring.

Navient has denied any violation of the law. "The company's decision to resolve these matters, which were based on unfounded claims, allows us to avoid the additional burden, expense, time and distraction to prevail in court," said Navient's chief legal officer Mark Heleen in a statement.

The settlement includes the states of Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia.

"Today's billion-dollar agreement will bring relief to thousands of borrowers in New York and across the nation and help them get back on their feet. Navient will no longer be able to line its pockets at the expense of students who are trying to earn a college degree," New York Attorney General Letitia James said in a statement Thursday.

"Americans across the nation are struggling with their student loan debt," Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul said, adding Navient "buried students into debt" with private loans they could never repay. "Today's settlement provides substantial student loan relief."

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HEADLINE	01/13 Sheriff: Baldwin phone not turned over yet
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/alec-baldwin-turned-phone-probe-fatal-set-shooting/story?id=82243710
GIST	<p>Nearly a month after a magistrate judge approved a search warrant for Alec Baldwin's cell phone, the actor has yet to comply with the order issued as part of an investigation into an on-set shooting that killed a cinematographer and wounded the director, authorities said.</p> <p>"To date, the cell phone has not been turned over to authorities," the Santa Fe County Sheriff's Office said in a statement issued on Thursday.</p> <p>Sheriff's officials in New Mexico also noted that the search warrant for Baldwin's phone was approved by a Santa Fe County magistrate judge on Dec. 16 and that Baldwin's attorney acknowledged receipt of the warrant. The Santa Fe County District Attorney's Office has been negotiating with Baldwin's lawyer to retrieve the phone and its contents.</p> <p>"The Sheriff's Office was advised that, due to jurisdictional concerns, the Santa Fe District Attorney's Office would be facilitating the retrieval of the phone on a consent basis," according to the agency's statement.</p> <p>Baldwin released a video statement on his Instagram refuting claims that he's not complying with the warrant.</p> <p>"Any suggestion that I am not complying with requests or orders, or search warrants about my phone, that's bullsh--. That's a lie," Baldwin said.</p>

He said he and his attorney are following a process required when one state requests information or evidence from a subject who lives in another state.

"It's a process that takes time. They have to specify what exactly they want. They just can't go through your phone and take, you know, your photos or your love letters to your wife or whatever," Baldwin said.

"But, of course, we are 1,000% going to comply with all that. We're, you know, perfectly fine with that."

The news on Baldwin's cellphone came as a backstage armorer for the film "Rust" filed a lawsuit alleging the movie's prop ammunition supplier was the source of a live round loaded in a gun that went off when held by Baldwin, fatally striking cinematographer Halyna Hutchins and wounding director Joel Souza.

The armorer, Hannah Gutierrez-Reed, filed the lawsuit on Wednesday in a New Mexico district court, naming Seth Kenney, the founder and managing member of PDQ Arm & Prop LLC in Albuquerque, as the sole defendant.

In the lawsuit, filed in Bernalillo County Second Judicial District Court, Gutierrez-Reed alleges the live round that killed Hutchins on Oct. 21 and was surgically extracted from Souza's shoulder came from a box of prop ammunition Kenney supplied to the movie that was clearly marked as inert, dummy rounds.

"The ammunition boxes failed to state a material fact, the contents contained both dummy and live ammunition, which were deceptively sold," the lawsuit contends.

Gutierrez-Reed, 24, claims she loaded the antique .45-caliber Colt revolver with what she thought were two dummy rounds that came from the box Kenney provided and four others she retrieved from her pocket.

"To the best of Hannah's knowledge, the gun was now loaded with six dummy rounds," the lawsuit states. "Hannah relied upon and trusted that defendants would only supply dummy prop ammunition or blanks, and no live rounds were ever to be on set."

Gutierrez-Reed contends the box of ammunition in question mysteriously showed up on set the morning of the fatal incident.

The lawsuit also contends that the "chaotic nature" on the film set, which included [some members of the film crew abruptly quitting](#) and walking off the job a day before the fatal incident, "created a perfect storm for a safety incident."

In an interview with ABC News days after the shooting, Kenney denied that the live round and other live rounds investigators found on the set came from his company.

"It's not a possibility that they came from PDQ or from myself personally," Kenney said. "When we send dummy rounds out, they get individually rattle tested before they get sent out."

In a new statement to ABC News issued Wednesday after the lawsuit was filed, Kenney said: "Investigators thoroughly examined the PDQ Arms & Prop, LLC inventory and concluded that PDQ's portion of Dummy Rounds and Blanks supplied to 'Rust' were safe."

"As a result," the statement continued, "Seth Kenney and PDQ Arm & Prop, LLC are not of interest in the ongoing investigation."

In the lawsuit, Gutierrez-Reed also recounts two instances where guns were accidentally discharged on the set prior to the fatal incident. One episode involved the movie's prop manager, and another involved Baldwin's stunt double, according to the lawsuit.

The suit contains a heated exchange of text messages between Guterrez-Reed and Kenney over the misfirings of the guns, in which Gutierrez-Reed suggested reporting the incidents to production officials. In response, Kenney purportedly texted "mistakes happen" and advised Guterrez not to "push it."

"Hannah interpreted this as that Seth, who was called the 'Armorer/Mentor' in call sheets, wanted to sweep this security incident under the rug," the lawsuit states.

Meanwhile, a homicide investigation being led by the Santa Fe County Sheriff's Office is continuing. No criminal charges have been filed.

Guterrez-Reed's suit comes weeks after her attorney, Jason Bowles, first suggested in an interview with "Good Morning America" that "sabotage" was involved in the fatal on-set shooting near Santa Fe, New Mexico. He did not cite specific evidence for his claim.

Santa Fe County District Attorney Mary Carmack-Altwies [told ABC News](#) in November that investigators have found no evidence that sabotage was involved in the shooting.

In [an interview](#) in December with ABC News' George Stephanopoulos, Baldwin said he had "no idea" how a live bullet got onto the set of "Rust," a Western he also was producing. He also claimed he "didn't pull the trigger" on the firearm that killed Hutchins and wounded Souza.

"Someone put a live bullet in a gun," an emotional Baldwin said, "a bullet that wasn't even supposed to be on the property."

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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	01/13 Cyberattack shuts Albuquerque NM schools
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/albuquerque-public-schools-shut-down-by-ransomware-incident/
GIST	<p>School officials in Albuquerque, New Mexico have cancelled classes for Thursday and Friday due to a cyberattack. The shutdown took place just days after a ransomware attack hit government services across Bernalillo County.</p> <p>In a statement posted to the Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) website, officials said schools will remain closed "as the district continues to investigate a cyberattack that compromised the student information system used to take attendance, contact families in emergencies, and assure that students are picked up from school by authorized adults."</p> <p>On Wednesday, the school said it was working with cybersecurity experts to get systems back up and running before Friday. The school amended its statement on Thursday.</p> <p>Athletic activities and other extracurricular activities will continue, but school meals will not be served while the schools are closed. For those in need of meals while the schools are shut down, officials suggested the Roadrunner Food Bank Food Assistance Line for help.</p> <p>They also suggested parents turn to the Boys & Girls Clubs of Central New Mexico, which will be providing free all-day programming for youth 5-18 while the school deals with the cyberattack.</p> <p>APS Superintendent Scott Elder told the Albuquerque Journal that teachers discovered the attack on Wednesday morning after they tried to log into the student information system and were unable to gain access to the site.</p>

"APS is working with local and national law enforcement as well as teams of cyber specialists to as quickly as possible limit our exposure to this attack, to protect all systems in our network, and ensure a safe environment to return to school and business as usual," Elder said.

APS spokeswoman Monica Armenta said the district does have cyber insurance.

Multiple government services across Bernalillo County -- which covers the state's most populous cities of Albuquerque, Los Ranchos, and Tijeras -- have been dealing with a ransomware attack that started between midnight and 5:30 a.m. on January 5.

County officials have taken the affected systems offline and cut network connections, but most county building are closed to the public. Emergency services are still available and 911 is still operating, but a Sheriff's Office customer service window was closed.

Visitation at the Metropolitan Detention Center has been postponed indefinitely, but all community centers are still open. Many other government services are still available over the phone and in person. County officials [said](#) in a statement that the attack knocked out the Clerk's Office, limiting access to marriage licenses, real estate transactions, and voter registrations.

"The public is being asked to understand the gravity of this ransomware issue and that, at this time, county services are still limited," officials said.

FBI spokesman Frank Fisher told the Albuquerque Journal that even though the school outages were taking place at the same time as the other issues, the cyberattack on APS was not tied to the ransomware attack on Bernalillo County.

On Wednesday, reports [emerged](#) that the Metropolitan Detention Center went into lockdown after the attack. A public defender filed a lawsuit revealing that the ransomware attack knocked out the jail's internet, data management servers, and security camera networks. The lawyer said inmates' rights had been violated because video-based court hearings were cancelled and people could only contact their lawyers through pay phones.

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HEADLINE	01/13 Belarus: upstart or Russia staging ground?
SOURCE	https://www.cyberscoop.com/belarus-cyber-upstart-or-russian-staging-ground/
GIST	<p>As the prospect of further Russian aggression in Ukraine looms, the Biden administration is concerned about Russian cyber operations against the U.S. and its allies. Yet as the White House engages with Moscow and builds out plans around these risks, it must watch an overlooked development in Russia's near-abroad: growing cyber integration between Belarus and the Kremlin.</p> <p>In November 2021, Mandiant published a report assessing with "high confidence" that the UNC1151 cyber group, which assisted the longstanding "Ghostwriter" campaign — stealing government credentials and spreading disinformation in Europe — is linked to the Belarusian government. It also assessed with "moderate confidence" that Belarus "is also likely at least partially responsible for the Ghostwriter campaign."</p> <p>Significantly, the report's authors added: "We cannot rule out Russian contributions to either UNC1151 or Ghostwriter."</p> <p>The report raises the prospect that Belarus is engaged in cyber-enabled influence operations abroad, and the authors explicitly say that Moscow's hand cannot be ruled out. However, events in the backdrop provide reason to be skeptical that Minsk is capable of sophisticated cyber operations independent of Russia. Both countries' security and geopolitical aims likewise call into question the relevance of any distinction between demonstrated Russian cyber operations and putative Belarusian ones.</p>

A Belarusian APT?

In July 2020, [Mandiant published](#) a report detailing an influence campaign, which began at least in March 2017, targeting Eastern European countries with anti-NATO and anti-U.S. information. Mandiant dubbed it “Ghostwriter.” The campaign was comprehensive, using compromised websites and spoofed email accounts to spread fake news articles, quotes, documents and other information — after which inauthentic online personas wrote articles referencing the material. While the report did not attribute Ghostwriter to a specific actor, it noted the campaign’s alignment with Russian security interests.

In April 2021, Mandiant published a second [report on Ghostwriter](#), noting an observed “expansion of narratives, targeting and [tactics, techniques and procedures]” since July 2020. Among other developments, the report cited the hacking of Polish officials’ social media accounts to spread disinformation and assessed with “high confidence” that UNC1151, “a suspected state-sponsored cyber espionage actor,” was involved in at least some aspects of Ghostwriter. There was mention of Belarus — like the targeting of a Belarusian blogger and Belarus being a subject of some disinformation narratives — but nothing about Minsk’s involvement.

While the recent report asserts UNC1151 is linked to the Belarusian government and thus that Belarus is involved in Ghostwriter, there is strong overlap between Russian and Belarusian interests in the campaign. Anti-NATO disinformation and combined cyber and information operations fall well within Moscow’s purview. Further, the most recent Mandiant report says that UNC1151 “has not targeted Russian or Belarusian state entities. It has spear phished intergovernmental organizations dealing with former-Soviet states, but not their governments.” The report does not say whether or not UNC1151 targeted non-state actors in Russia, begging the question of whether it targeted Russian entities at all. Minsk certainly has no reason to run anti-NATO disinformation campaigns in Russia, but this targeting of entities outside Russia closely mirrors the Russian spectrum of continuous cyber operations — from state-backed operations to loosely tolerated ones that attack foreign targets and don’t undermine Kremlin objectives.

One noteworthy hint as to the architects of UNC1151 can be found in screenshots embedded in Mandiant’s report. A linguistic nod to Moscow’s historical colonialism toward Belarus likely also reflects its guiding hand in the Ghostwriter campaign: Cyrillic [“allusions to Belorussiya”](#) (the tsarist-era term used for the “white Russia” expanse of the Russian empire), vice “Belarus” (the term Belarusians have commonly used to refer to themselves, particularly since 1991).

Cyber capacity with the regime, or with the people?

Prior to the Lukashenko regime’s [manipulation of the August 2020 elections](#) and subsequent crackdown on his political opponents, relations between “Europe’s last dictatorship” and the West were slowly beginning to thaw. This dynamic reverberated in the Belarusian economy, most prominently in its tech sector. By the mid-2010s, over half a billion dollars in tech exports were [pouring out of](#) this “Eastern European Silicon Valley” — many of them destined for clientele in the United States and European Union. As these economic ties solidified, and as opportunities for young, tech-savvy Belarusians expanded, voters saw prospects for greater reforms.

However, as mass protests against the rigged election outcome were [unleashed across the country](#), Belarusian security services — many officers of which defected to the oppositionists’ side — found difficulty containing the unrest. The Belarusian KGB, or BKGB, raided Yandex and Uber offices in Minsk, betraying some desperation in curbing protesters’ technical capacity to organize. [Reports out of Moscow](#) also indicated the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) was lending a guiding hand. Throughout the course of the next year, the Lukashenko regime’s thuggish security services found themselves continually [humiliated by a band of hacktivists](#), dubbed “Cyber Partisans.” Staffed by disaffected officers and tech-sector dissidents, the group hacked and defaced state websites, pilfered internal databases of regime officials’ vehicles and passports, and leaked audio and video recordings of government malfeasance. The group’s exploits continued through 2021, feeding [investigative insights](#) into the corruption of the Lukashenko regime.

While not necessarily diagnostic, the Lukashenko regime's apparent lack of technical prowess and degree of dependency on Russian counterparts to deal with domestic turmoil since 2020 appears incongruent with the degree of sophistication the Ghostwriter campaign entailed.

What's Yours is Mine, by Default

Building on the legacy of the Soviet-era KGB, the Lukashenko regime kept the bulk of the technological and bureaucratic infrastructure (including KGB nomenclature) in place. Subsequent agreements concluded under the auspices of the CIS — in which Russia enjoys a preponderance of influence — prioritized joint computer crime prevention in 2001 and have only intensified since then, culminating in [a recent increase](#) in law enforcement cooperation. This degree of compatibility between Russian and Belarusian security services thus increasingly blurs any meaningful distinction between them. Lukashenko himself [noted this dynamic](#) last summer, nodding to the “commonality” of their tasks.

Through a mixture of inertia and design, this “shared” sense of duty also extends to the cyber and digital surveillance domain. Moscow's system for lawful intercept of telephony (and later, online traffic) — the System for Operative Investigative Activities, or SORM, orchestrated by the Russian Federal Security Service — was largely [adopted and duplicated](#) by Belarus, among other CIS member-states. In practice, this means Moscow's “domestic” technical surveillance capacity likely encompasses Belarus in its entirety. Unlike U.S. and European analogs which enable companies to verify the validity of a wiretap order, SORM-related laws in Russia and Belarus [compel service providers](#) to install eavesdropping equipment; the associated warranty is classified. The outfitting, servicing and maintenance of the system is conducted by the [same set of Russian contractors](#), some of which were recently consolidated into a [near-monopoly](#) under a holding company administered by Kremlin-linked oligarch Alisher Usmanov. SORM equipment, meanwhile, is marketed and installed by states [throughout the globe](#).

That the burgeoning Belarusian tech sector became [an immediate target](#) of the Lukashenko regime during the 2020 uprisings, and that Moscow continues its concurrent push for [tech indigenization](#), sends an ominous signal to Western firms outsourcing operations to the region (several of which have [reportedly borne](#) the brunt of major Russian cyber operations). Indeed, the prospect that Russian security services pilfer lucrative source code developed in Belarus — long before it reaches end-users in the West — should not be ruled out. Belarus may be not only a staging ground for cyber-enabled operations against foreign targets, but a valuable exfiltration-point for foreign technology development.

Conclusion

U.S. policymakers must recognize that [growing cooperation](#) and blurry distinctions between Russian and Belarusian security services will shape the cyber operations landscape. The Russian government already sends intelligence operatives overseas to launch cyber operations in and from other countries. Moscow has also set up front organizations in multiple other countries to conduct cyber and information operations against foreign targets. This report and other events are a critical reminder that dealing with Russian cyber operations may increasingly mean dealing with Belarusian involvement as well.

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HEADLINE	01/13 FBI shifts approach to cybercrime
SOURCE	https://www.cyberscoop.com/fbi-vorndran-ugoretz-arrest-model-ransomware/
GIST	<p>In 2022, the FBI is looking to approach cybercrime differently.</p> <p>During separate public appearances on Thursday, two FBI officials said the bureau was going to change up how it deals with computer intrusions.</p> <p>“The FBI specifically is moving away from an indictment- and arrest-first model into the totality of imposing costs on our adversaries, and we’re making tremendous progress there,” said Bryan Vorndran, assistant director of the FBI’s cyber division. “There is a right time for indictments and arrests and certainly one of our goals to take players off the field. But at the end of the day, we’re a team member first before we’re prioritizing our own authorities.”</p>

Vorndran, speaking at an event hosted by the Silverado Policy Accelerator, touted the FBI's workforce around the country and the skills they can bring to bear.

"That decentralized workforce is a huge strength for our government, especially given the FBI statutory authorities for incident response, counterintelligence, domestic intelligence and computer intrusions," he said. "You know, we can put a cyber-trained FBI agent on any doorstep in this country within an hour."

The FBI's incident response capabilities, he said, are one reason why Congress should ensure that [incident reporting legislation that stalled in Congress last year](#) should specify that the FBI gets those reports "in real time" from the Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency.

Speaking at a Washington Post event, another top FBI official talked about specific ways that the bureau could impose financial costs on cybercriminals.

Tonya Ugoretz, deputy assistant director of the cyber division, mentioned [seizures of ransomware payments](#) back from criminals in cases like the Colonial Pipeline attack, although she didn't have dollar totals for 2021.

"The types of ransomware seizures that you saw us undertake with the Department of Justice last year are certainly things we want to replicate ... and try to scale," she said.

And those kinds of interruptions of illicit cybercrime gains happen elsewhere in the bureau, too, such as a team focused on helping small- and mid-sized businesses.

"That team acts quickly with financial institutions to help those institutions freeze the funds which then makes it possible in some, but not all, instances to recover those funds for those victims," she said. "That occurred to the tune of \$400 million in 2020. That only happens when we learn about the incident and learn about the details of it in a very quick time window."

It's just as key, though, for victims to follow any notification to authorities with a willingness to work with the FBI, she said.

The question of how to "impose costs" on cybercriminals has generated some recent debate from cyber thinkers. [Writing this week for CyberScoop](#), Selena Larson — a senior threat intelligence analyst for Proofpoint and Cyber Project nonresident fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center — said that "the collection of high-profile takedowns, indictments and financial actions don't appear to have lasting impact" on ransomware gangs. Instead, she said, the focus should be on amping up cyber defense.

Josephine Wolff, a professor of cybersecurity policy at Tufts University, cast doubt this week on the effectiveness of arrests and ransomware payment seizures.

"Approaches to combating ransomware that might have a larger impact on the criminal ecosystem include cracking down on cryptocurrency transactions, making ransom payments illegal, making it illegal for insurers to cover those payments, and imposing security requirements on critical infrastructure operators to reduce the likelihood of infection in the first place," [she wrote for README](#).

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HEADLINE	01/13 Microsoft yanks Window Server updates
SOURCE	https://threatpost.com/microsoft-yanks-buggy-windows-server-updates/177648/
GIST	<p>Microsoft has yanked the Windows Server updates it issued on Patch Tuesday after admins found that the updates had critical bugs that break three things: They trigger spontaneous boot loops on Windows servers that act as domain controllers, break Hyper-V and render ReFS volume systems unavailable.</p> <p>The shattering of Windows was first reported by BornCity on Tuesday, as in, on the same day that Microsoft released a mega-dump of 97 security updates in its January 2022 Patch Tuesday update.</p>

This month's batch included the Windows Server 2012 R2 KB5009624 update, the Windows Server 2019 KB5009557 update and the Windows Server 2022 KB5009555 update, all of which are apparently buggy.

"Administrators of Windows Domain Controllers should be careful about installing the January 2022 security updates," reported [BornCity](#), which is a blog about information technology run by German freelance writer and physics engineer Günter Born.

"I have now received numerous reports that Windows servers acting as domain controllers will not boot afterwards," Born wrote. "Lsass.exe (or wininit.exe) triggers a blue screen with the stop error 0xc0000005. It can hit all Windows Server versions that act as domain controllers, according to my estimation."

Domain controllers are servers that handle security authentication requests within a Windows domain. Microsoft's Hyper-V, the other chunk of Windows being broken by the Windows Server updates, is a native hypervisor that can create virtual machines on x86-64 systems running Windows.

The third thing that's shattering due to the updates, Resilient File System (ReFS), is a file system that's designed to maximize data availability, scale efficiently to large data sets across diverse workloads and provide data integrity with resiliency to corruption, as Microsoft [describes](#) it.

Born cited numerous reports from users who've concluded that the issue affects all supported Windows Server versions.

Multiple Reddit users confirmed the problems. [One commenter](#) said that it "Looks like KB5009557 (2019) and KB5009555 (2022) are causing something to fail on domain controllers, which then keep rebooting every few minutes."

Another Reddit contributor [said](#) on Tuesday that they had just rebooted Win10 laptops that had the installed KB5009543 & KB5008876 updates and found that they're also breaking L2TP VPN connections.

"Now their L2TP VPNs to different sites (All SonicWalls) are not working," the Redditor said, citing an error message that read: "The L2TP connection attempt failed because the security layer encountered a processing error during initial negotiations with the remote computer."

On Thursday, following the server update brouhaha, BleepingComputer [reported](#) that Microsoft has pulled the January Windows Server cumulative updates, which are reportedly no longer accessible via Windows Update. As of Thursday afternoon, however, the company reportedly hadn't pulled the Windows 10 and Windows 11 cumulative updates that were breaking L2TP VPN connections.

Threatpost has reached out to Microsoft for comment and will update the story with any updates we receive.

When Patches Bite Back

How do you convince organizations to patch promptly when patches sometimes don't work – or, worse, when they cause outages on critical infrastructure such as directory controllers?

It's clearly a problem from a security perspective, experts say. "The [log4j](#) difficulties of the past few weeks demonstrate that ... we need organizations to apply security patches when they are available," said John Bambenek, principal threat hunter at Netenrich.

When patches don't work, or worse, when they break things, it "provides the counter incentive to patching where organizations take a risk-averse approach to applying updates," he told Threatpost on Thursday. "Downtime is easily measurable...the incremental risk of a security breach is not, which means cautious (instead of proactive) actions to patching will tend to win out."

	<p>It's a painful tradeoff to make between keeping your operations going by using systems with known vulnerabilities versus keeping those systems fully secure but with added administrative effort, noted Bud Broomhead, CEO at Viakoo. "Organizations make these tradeoffs every day with IoT devices that fail to get patched quickly (or ever); however, it's uncommon to see this with Windows Server, because there are such effective mechanisms through Windows Update to deliver and install patches quickly."</p> <p>Broomhead suggested that despite the testing Microsoft goes through in releasing an update, one best practice is to always install a new patch on a single machine before deploying more broadly. "This can help Windows Server administrators to assess their specific issues, and their tolerance for running under those conditions until a more stable patch is available," he told Threatpost.</p> <p>That's actually closer to the reality, noted Roy Horev, co-founder and CTO at Vulcan Cyber. "First, very rarely are patches ever directly applied straight from Microsoft, or any vendor, on Tuesday, or any other day, without first going through a series of tests to make sure they aren't breaking things," he pointed out.</p> <p>Even so, it's tough to implement vendor patches and updates without breaking things, he told Threatpost via email – even if those patches are delivered straight from Redmond. "The eternal compromise between secure and/or stable production environments doesn't rest just because the updates are coming from Microsoft," Horev commented.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 GootLoader targets law, accounting firms
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/01/gootloader-hackers-targeting-employees.html
GIST	<p>Operators of the GootLoader campaign are setting their sights on employees of accounting and law firms as part of a fresh onslaught of widespread cyberattacks to deploy malware on infected systems, an indication that the adversary is expanding its focus to other high-value targets.</p> <p>"GootLoader is a stealthy initial access malware, which after getting a foothold into the victim's computer system, infects the system with ransomware or other lethal malware," researchers from eSentire said in a report shared with The Hacker News.</p> <p>The cybersecurity services provider said it intercepted and dismantled intrusions aimed at three law firms and an accounting enterprise. The names of the victims were not disclosed.</p> <p>Malware can be delivered on targets' systems via many methods, including poisoned search results, fake updates, and trojanized applications downloaded from sites linking to pirated software. GootLoader resorts to the first technique.</p> <p>In March 2021, details emerged of a global drive-by download offensive that involved tricking unsuspecting victims into visiting compromised WordPress websites belonging to legitimate businesses via a technique called search engine poisoning that pushes these sites to the top of the search results.</p> <p>"Their modus operandi (MO) is to entice a business professional to one of the compromised websites and then have them click on the link, leading to Gootloader, which attempts to retrieve the final payload, whether it be ransomware, a banking trojan or intrusion tool/credential stealer," the researchers explained in a write-up.</p> <p>eSentire estimates that over 100,000 malicious webpages were set up last year across websites representing entities in the hotel industry, high-end retail, education, healthcare, music and visual arts, with one of the hacked websites hosting 150 rogue pages designed to social engineer users searching for postnuptial or intellectual property agreements.</p> <p>The websites, for their part, are broken into by exploiting security vulnerabilities in the WordPress content management system (CMS), effectively permitting the attackers to clandestinely inject the pages of their liking without the website owner's knowledge.</p>

	<p>The nature of GootLoader and the way it's designed to provide a backdoor into systems implies that the goal of the attacks could be intelligence gathering, but it could also be utilised as a tool for delivering additional damaging payloads, including Cobalt Strike and ransomware, to compromised systems for follow-on attacks.</p> <p>"GootLoader relies heavily on social engineering to establish its foothold, from poisoning Google search results to fashioning the payload," said Keegan Keplinger, research and reporting lead for eSentire's Threat Response Unit (TRU).</p> <p>"GootLoader's operators invite employees to seek, download, and execute their malware under the guise of a free business agreement template. This is particularly effective against legal firms, who may encounter uncommon requests from clients."</p> <p>To mitigate such threats, it's recommended that organizations put in place a vetting process for business agreement samples, train employees to open documents only from trusted sources, and ensure that the content downloaded matches the content intended to be downloaded.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 GAO: gaps in govt. information sharing
SOURCE	https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/incident-response/statutory-restrictions-hindered-federal-response-to-solarwinds-microsoft-exchange
GIST	<p>The SolarWinds and Microsoft Exchange incidents improved coordination between the government and private industry, but also exposed worrying gaps in the government's information sharing, auditors concluded in a new Government Accountability Office report released Thursday.</p> <p>Specifically, officials from two agencies (the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency) told auditors that information-sharing protocols in the wake of both incidents were "slow" and "a challenge," largely due to statutory restrictions. Many exchanges with stakeholders of information around the vulnerabilities took place manually through email, instead of through dedicated or automated channels.</p> <p>The review reinforces the significant damage that both incidents had on federal networks. Exploiting the Exchange vulnerabilities, GAO said, would have given Chinese hackers and other threat actors access to "email accounts and data, as well as [the ability to] install malware on systems and harvest user credentials, which could have been used to gain persistent unauthorized access to other networks at an impacted agency."</p> <p>On SolarWinds, the GAO has reiterated a point that others in government have made, chiefly that the government still can't conclusively say federal networks that downloaded the corrupted Orion update are now safe or that the intruders have been kicked out.</p> <p>"Even though CISA's efforts to work with agencies have provided a degree of confidence that the threat actor is no longer present, the threat actor may have established undiscovered persistent access within affected agencies and private companies' networks," the report notes. "Failure to perform comprehensive and thorough remediation activity will expose those networks and potentially cloud environments to substantial risk for long-term undetected APT activity."</p> <p>They also found that logging practices at many federal agencies were woefully insufficient, with half of the 24 agencies evaluated saying gaps in network and log coverage prevented a quicker response to the flaws. The National Security Council concluded that the need to increase detection and response activities for significant cybersecurity incidents was one of the chief lessons of the two incidents, along with further building on past information sharing and public/private collaboration efforts.</p> <p>"Agency officials also told us that the varying levels of data log preservation among agencies and a lack of data collection tools limited evidence collection for the incidents," auditors noted.</p>

One of the Biden administration's mandates to federal agencies last year — [a requirement to identify all devices connected to their networks and implement data logging](#) — appears to be a direct response to this lack of visibility from federal agencies.

One federal official noted that “log retention was a particular challenge for investigators responding to the SolarWinds incident as the threat actor was in agencies’ networks months before it was detected and evidence may not have existed at all agencies based on an agency’s log preservation activities.”

The White House and the Office of Management and Budget have said that their efforts to improve logging capabilities over the next three years will not only [help lay the groundwork](#) for the widespread use of technologies like Endpoint Detection and Response and Security Orchestration and Automated Remediation systems, it will also help CISA as it looks to leverage new statutory authorities to conduct proactive threat hunting operations on other agency networks this year and beyond.

Last year, Jen Easterly told Congress that putting such systems in place around federal networks would “allow us to not just focus on the perimeter but really to focus in-depth, all the way down to the host level, at the workstation, at the server, to ensure that we can see what threats are out there, detect suspicious activity and ensure we’re able to mitigate and remediate it as soon as possible,” the CISA director said in a Senate hearing last week.

In the wake of the emergency order the agency [issued in late 2020](#), at least six agencies reported that they were unable to generate enough telemetry to even identify or detect potentially anomalous behavior related to the flaw, while 11 agencies said they had networks where such activity “could” have occurred. Just nine agencies were able to confidently assert the presence or absence of such activity.

The report also underscores how statutory language can sometimes obscure the seriousness of an incident. To wit: 19 agencies did not report SolarWinds as a “major incident,” with some saying the incident did not qualify under the definition provided by OMB. Two agencies said they did not report it as such because they had determined that no systems or data were compromised, but 16 agencies provided no additional explanation.

Positive takeaways from cyber incidents

The incidents did accomplish one thing: improving the muscle memory of the federal government and private sector when it comes to coordinating in the wake of a newly discovered breach or vulnerability. Multiple officials said the information sharing with industry allowed the government to quickly ascertain the scope of the SolarWinds campaign, increased visibility around servers vulnerable to the Microsoft Exchange bugs and patching gaps and allowed the government to build trust with stakeholders outside the government in ways that are repeatable for future incidents. In fact, CISA, FBI and other agencies are currently conducting many of the same incident and asset response activities regarding the Log4j vulnerabilities, which are broadly present in both public and private IT networks.

Meanwhile, those same agencies have completed all their mandated responses regarding the Microsoft Exchange vulnerabilities, with the FBI leading the government’s response in many areas, like investigating and gathering intelligence, disrupting the IT infrastructure of threat actors, sharing information with the private sector.

The findings are based on interviews officials from CISA, the Department of Justice and FBI, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence the NSA, and the White House National Security Council. Auditors also relied on reporting documentation from all 24 CFO Act agencies, descriptions and timelines from federal agencies and research private cybersecurity vendors around both incidents.

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HEADLINE	01/13 Maryland official mislead on attack?
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/maryland-lawmaker-officials-misled-ransomware-attack

GIST	<p>A leading Maryland lawmaker said Thursday that top legislators were misled about the seriousness of a cyberattack on the state health department.</p> <p>Sen. Paul Pinsky criticized Maryland Chief Information Security Officer Chip Stewart during a hearing on Thursday, a day after Stewart announced that the Dec. 4 attack involved ransomware.</p> <p>Pinsky, who chairs the Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee, cited a Dec. 22 briefing he participated in about the attack with House Speaker Adrienne Jones and Senate President Bill Ferguson. At the time, he said, Stewart only called it “an incident” and neglected to say it was a ransomware attack, even though he knew it was at the time.</p> <p>“You basically misinformed them,” said Pinsky, a Prince George’s County Democrat. “You were dishonest and the governor’s staff was there, too, and I don’t know who was part of this collaboration to misinform or disinform the public and the legislature, but I think there’s got to be an accounting, and while we can’t bring up perjury — this is not a court of law — I think it’s shameful.”</p> <p>Stewart said he remembered the briefing differently.</p> <p>“I will apologize if this seems to be an attempt to mislead,” Stewart said. “It is certainly not that. So, we’ve kept details of what occurred very close to the chest, because it’s a criminal investigation and having those details come out could impede our ability to contain and mitigate the incident.”</p> <p>Michael Ricci, Gov. Larry Hogan’s spokesman, said Pinsky was wrong to say the lawmakers were misled.</p> <p>“He’s wrong about that, but it certainly wouldn’t be the first time Mr. Pinsky has tried to manipulate a situation for political gain,” Ricci said.</p> <p>Lawmakers also have long been critical about a lack of transparency regarding the administration’s purchase of 500,000 COVID-19 tests from South Korea in 2020.</p> <p>During the hearing, Pinsky criticized the handling of the ransomware attack for not being transparent.</p> <p>“Mr. Stewart, I’ve seen enough dancing,” Pinsky said. “You know, I’ve heard 40 minutes of dancing, and apparently I heard dancing on Dec. 22, and the public should expect more than that.”</p> <p>Stewart announced Wednesday that the disruption affecting the release of data on the state’s coronavirus website was caused by a ransomware attack that involved a demand for payment, which was not paid.</p> <p>Pinsky wanted to know what took so long.</p> <p>“Why did that happen yesterday, when we’ve had six weeks prior to that? And it’s unfortunate that we don’t know what to tell the public,” Pinsky said. “People are asking us, and we don’t know who to point to to say you can trust.”</p> <p>In his announcement Wednesday, Stewart said the health department was able to isolate and contain its systems within several hours of first detecting the attack. He said an ongoing investigation has not identified evidence of unauthorized access to or acquisition of state data.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 Ukraine police arrest ransomware gang
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/ukrainian-police-arrests-ransomware-gang-that-hit-over-50-firms/
GIST	Ukrainian police officers have arrested a ransomware affiliate group responsible for attacking at least 50 companies in the U.S. and Europe.

It is estimated that the total losses resulting from the attacks is in excess of one million U.S. dollars. A 36-year-old resident of Ukraine's capital Kiev was identified as the leader of the group, which included his wife and three other acquaintances, the police states.

It is unclear what ransomware strain the gang used to encrypt data on victim computers but they delivered the malware through spam emails.

Three members of the gang received the ransoms from paying victims in cryptocurrency. In exchange, they provided the decryption tool to restore data, the Ukrainian [police says](#) in an announcement today.

“According to preliminary data, more than 50 companies were affected by the attacks, the total amount of damage reaches more than one million US dollars,” the police adds.

To legalize the funds received as ransom payments, the attackers carried out complex financial transactions using online payment services that are banned in Ukraine, passing them around in an extensive network of fictitious identities.

Apart from the ransomware activity, the actors also VPN-like services that enabled other cybercriminals to carry out illegal activities ranging from downloading malware to hacking.

The investigation revealed that these services were used to compromise systems belonging to government and commercial organizations to steal sensitive data, deploy ransomware, or launch distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks.

One of the defendants was also stealing card data of British citizens to buy items from online stores and then resell them online. This process is a simple way to convert into cash the funds on stolen cards.

The police raided the homes and cars of nine suspects and confiscated computer equipment, bank cards, and flash drives which investigators will examine for additional evidence that could lead to more arrests. The suspects face criminal charges relevant to money laundering, interference in computers and networks, and the creation, use, distribution, and sale of malicious software.

These arrests are a joint effort from law enforcement officers in the U.K., the U.S. and Ukraine.

Law enforcement crackdown

The cybercrime unit of the Ukrainian police has been very active in recent months, arresting ransomware actors, fraudsters, botnet operators, and phishing actors.

More specifically, the SSU arrested the following actors recently:

- October 2021 – [Two ransomware actors](#) behind hundreds of attacks.
- October 2021 – [Members of a money-laundering operation](#) offering services to hackers.
- October 2021 – [Members of the LockerGoga](#) ransomware group.
- November 2021 – [Five phishing actors](#) who hacked into Apple and Samsung accounts.
- December 2021 – [51 data brokers](#) who sold the details of 300 million people.

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HEADLINE	01/13 Phishers target Office 365 users
SOURCE	https://www.helpnetsecurity.com/2022/01/13/phishers-adobe-cloud/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>Phishers are creating Adobe Creative Cloud accounts and using them to send phishing emails capable of thwarting traditional checks and some advanced threat protection solutions, Avanan security researcher Jeremy Fuchs warns.</p> <p>This new wave of attacks started in December 2021, and they are exploiting the fact that Adobe’s apps are designed to foster collaboration by sharing documents.</p> <p>The attack</p>

The attack is simple, really: the phishers create/import and host on Adobe Cloud an official-looking PDF pointing to a classic credential harvesting page hosted outside the Adobe suite (in this case, Weebly).

Then they share the document with the victims, who get a legitimate email from Adobe, saying that a document has been shared with them.

Recipients who follow the link in the email ("Open") and then the link in the PDF ("Access Document") are faced with a phishing page asking them to sign in with their Office 365 credentials to view the attached PDF.

Recommendations

The attackers are taking advantage of the trust that [email security](#) solutions place in Adobe, Fuchs [noted](#). "Even more sinister is the fact that hackers can track the recipients who have opened and taken action on the PDF."

Email security solutions should not rely on static Allow lists, he added, and they should be using a sandbox so they can open and inspect all links – now matter how many link "hops" have to be made to reach the final landing page.

End users, on the other hand, should remember not to inherently trust emails sent via online services as anyone can create legitimate accounts (or hijack them).

In this case, both the PDF and the phishing page have grammar and spelling errors that should raise users' suspicion. While users whose first language isn't English might not notice that, everybody should definitely find suspicious the fact that the fake Office 365-themed login page is hosted on Weebly.

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HEADLINE	01/13 BlueNoroff targets cryptocurrency startups
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/attacks-breaches/bluenoroff-threat-group-targets-cryptocurrency-startups?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>BlueNoroff, an advanced persistent threat (APT) group that's part of the larger Lazarus Group associated with North Korea, is behind a series of attacks against small and medium-sized companies that have led to serious cryptocurrency losses.</p> <p>The campaign, dubbed SnatchCrypto, targets organizations that deal with cryptocurrencies and smart contracts, decentralized finance, blockchain, and the financial technology industry in their work, report the Kaspersky researchers who observed it. These companies were targeted for a reason, they said: Startups often receive messages and documents from unfamiliar senders.</p> <p>"As most cryptocurrency businesses are small or medium-sized startups, they cannot invest lots of money into their internal security system," researchers wrote in a blog post. "The actor understands this and takes advantage by using elaborate social engineering schemes."</p> <p>In this campaign, the attackers attempt to manipulate the victim by pretending to be an existing venture capital firm. Researchers saw the names of more than 15 venture businesses used in these attacks but believe the actual organizations have nothing to do with the threat.</p> <p>Attackers send these startup employees a "full-featured Windows backdoor with surveillance functions, disguised as a contract or another business file," researchers report. If the file is opened on a device connected to the Internet, another macro-enabled document would be obtained to deploy malware.</p> <p>This malware sends the target's general information and PowerShell agent to the attackers, creating a backdoor. From there, BlueNoroff deploys additional tools, including a keylogger and screenshot taker, to monitor victims. After weeks or months of tracking, the attackers find a prominent target and use the data they've collected to steal large amounts of cryptocurrency from them.</p>

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HEADLINE	01/13 Jan 6 panel subpoenas social media firms
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/jan-6-panel-subpoenas-records-from-social-media-giants-alphabet-meta-reddit-and-twitter-11642110158?mod=hp_lead_pos6
GIST	<p>The House select committee investigating the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol issued subpoenas to four social-media companies as part of its investigation into the riot and its causes.</p> <p>The committee issued subpoenas to Google parent company Alphabet Inc., Meta Platforms Inc., Reddit Inc. and Twitter Inc. after receiving what the committee called inadequate responses to its prior requests for information. The committee is demanding records related to the spread of misinformation, efforts to overturn the 2020 election, domestic extremism and foreign influence in the 2020 election.</p> <p>“Two key questions for the Select Committee are how the spread of misinformation and violent extremism contributed to the violent attack on our democracy, and what steps—if any—social-media companies took to prevent their platforms from being breeding grounds for radicalizing people to violence,” said the committee’s chairman, Rep. Bennie Thompson (D., Miss.). “It’s disappointing that after months of engagement, we still do not have the documents and information necessary to answer those basic questions.”</p> <p>The committee said it has been investigating the role of social-media platforms in efforts to overturn the 2020 election results and what the companies might have known about the spread of extremism in the lead-up to Jan. 6, 2021.</p> <p>Mr. Thompson said in a letter to Alphabet that its YouTube was used for communications related to the Jan. 6 attack and to spread misinformation about the election. In a letter to Meta, Mr. Thompson cited public reports that the company’s platforms, which include Facebook, were used to spread messages of violence and for efforts to mobilize people to challenge the election results.</p> <p>“We’ve been actively cooperating with the Select Committee since they started their investigation, responding substantively to their requests for documents, and are committed to working with Congress through this process,” Alphabet said in a statement.</p> <p>Meta spokesman Andy Stone said that “Meta has produced documents to the committee on a schedule committee staff requested—and we will continue to do so.”</p> <p>A Reddit spokesperson said the company had received the subpoena and will continue to work with the committee on its requests.</p> <p>Twitter declined to comment.</p> <p>The committee’s latest round of subpoenas comes a day after it asked House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy of California to voluntarily provide information about his conversations with then-President Donald Trump before, during and after the riot. Mr. McCarthy rejected the request, saying it was politically motivated.</p> <p>The panel is led by Mr. Thompson and Vice Chairwoman Liz Cheney (R., Wyo.). The investigation is looking into the causes and security failures of the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, when supporters of Mr. Trump stormed the building and temporarily disrupted the certification of Democrat Joe Biden’s presidential election win.</p> <p>The panel has demanded records from a number of social-media companies over the past several months. The committee also has contacted former Trump administration officials and allies for testimony or documents.</p>

	The panel also asked to meet with Reps. Scott Perry (R., Pa.) and Jim Jordan (R., Ohio). Both rejected the committee's request, saying the panel is illegitimate.
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HEADLINE	01/14 Report: NKorea hackers stole \$400M 2021
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/14/north-korean-hackers-stole-400m-in-digital-assets-last-year-says-report
GIST	<p>North Korea has launched at least seven attacks on cryptocurrency platforms that extracted nearly \$400m worth of digital assets last year, one of its most successful years on record, according to a new analysis.</p> <p>“From 2020 to 2021, the number of North Korean-linked hacks jumped from four to seven, and the value extracted from these hacks grew by 40%,” said the report by blockchain experts Chainalysis, which was released on Thursday.</p> <p>“Once North Korea gained custody of the funds, they began a careful laundering process to cover up and cash out.”</p> <p>A United Nations panel of experts that monitors sanctions on North Korea has accused Pyongyang of using stolen funds to support its nuclear and ballistic missile programs to circumvent sanctions.</p> <p>North Korea does not respond to media inquiries but has previously released statements denying allegations of hacking.</p> <p>Last year the US charged three North Korean computer programmers working for the country's intelligence service with a massive, years-long hacking spree aimed at stealing more than \$1.3bn in money and cryptocurrency, affecting companies from banks to Hollywood movie studios.</p> <p>Chainalysis did not identify all the targets of the hacks, but said they were primarily investment firms and centralised exchanges, including Liquid.com, which announced in August that an unauthorised user had gained access to some of the cryptocurrency wallets it managed.</p> <p>The attackers used phishing lures, code exploits, malware and advanced social engineering to siphon funds out of these organisations' internet-connected “hot” wallets into North Korea-controlled addresses, the report said.</p> <p>Many of last year's attacks were likely carried out by the Lazarus Group, a hacking group sanctioned by the US, which says it is controlled by the reconnaissance general bureau, North Korea's primary intelligence bureau.</p> <p>The group has been accused of involvement in the WannaCry ransomware attacks, the hacking of international banks and customer accounts, and the 2014 cyber-attacks on Sony Pictures Entertainment.</p> <p>North Korea also appeared to step up efforts to launder stolen cryptocurrency, significantly increasing its use of mixers, or software tools that pool and scramble cryptocurrencies from thousands of addresses, Chainalysis said.</p> <p>The report said researchers had identified \$170m in old, un laundered cryptocurrency holdings from 49 separate hacks spanning from 2017 to 2021.</p> <p>The report said it was unclear why the hackers would still be sitting on these funds but that they could be hoping to outwit law enforcement interest before cashing out.</p> <p>“Whatever the reason may be, the length of time that [North Korea] is willing to hold on to these funds is illuminating, because it suggests a careful plan, not a desperate and hasty one.”</p>

HEADLINE	01/14 Hackers bring down Ukraine govt. websites
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/14/world/europe/hackers-ukraine-government-sites.html
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine — Hackers brought down several Ukrainian government websites on Friday, posting a message on the site of the Foreign Ministry saying, “Be afraid and expect the worst.”</p> <p>The cyberattack, which came a day after the apparent breakdown of diplomatic talks between Russia and the West intended to forestall a threatened Russian military attack on Ukraine, appeared in Ukrainian, Russian and Polish on the website of the Foreign Ministry.</p> <p>“As a result of a massive cyberattack, the websites of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a number of other government agencies are temporarily down,” the ministry said in a statement.</p> <p>Diplomats and analysts have been anticipating a cyberattack on Ukraine amid the tensions with Russia, but proving such actions is notoriously difficult. Ukraine did not directly blame Russia for the attack, but pointedly noted that there was a long record of Russian cyber assaults against Ukraine in the past.</p> <p>The move to post the message on the Foreign Ministry site in three languages seemed to be an effort to obfuscate the hackers’ origin and motives, and shift blame and suspicion elsewhere.</p> <p>“Ukrainians! All your personal data was uploaded to the internet,” the message read. “All data on the computer is being destroyed. All information about you became public. Be afraid and expect the worst.” It raised a number of historical grievances between Poland and Ukraine.</p> <p>The talks between Russia and the United States and NATO in Europe this week were intended to find a diplomatic resolution after Russia massed tens of thousands of troops near the border with Ukraine and demanded sweeping security concessions, including a promise not to accept Ukraine into the alliance.</p> <p>On Thursday, Russian officials said the talks had not yielded results, and one senior diplomat said they were “approaching a dead end.”</p>
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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	01/14 Sweden to withdraw troops from Sahel
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/sweden-withdraw-french-led-special-forces-mali-minister-2022-01-14/
GIST	<p>BREST, France, Jan 14 (Reuters) - Sweden has decided to withdraw its troops this year from a European special forces mission to the Sahel region, and will review its U.N. contribution after the arrival of private Russian military contractors in Mali, its foreign minister said.</p> <p>"We have already decided that this year we will withdraw (from) the force of Takuba," Ann Linde told reporters on Friday on the sidelines of an EU foreign ministers meeting in western France.</p> <p>"The question is what do we do with Minusma," she said, referring to the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Mali.</p> <p>The Swedish parliament approved the deployment of up to 150 soldiers to Takuba in 2020 and it has some 250 military personnel as part of Minusma.</p>

Takuba was established as a partial successor to Barkhane, France's counter-terrorism operation in the West African Sahel region that French President Emmanuel Macron has started to reduce from its initial 5,000-strong force.

It comprises some 14 European countries, which provide special forces, logistical and tactical support to work alongside regional forces for targeted operations against Islamist militants.

French officials have said it will discuss with its partners how to respond operationally, but have acknowledged that some countries in the mission are particularly uneasy after the arrival in Mali of private military contractors from the Russian Wagner Group, whose members are mostly ex-service personnel.

Most of Takuba's operations are in the west African country.

Mali's military-led interim government, which wants to extend its mandate for five years, has accused Paris of abandoning it and contracted Wagner, a move France and its allies have said was incompatible with their military presence.

Linde said the confirmed arrival of the Wagner group and the junta's efforts to stay in power were unacceptable.

"We now know (there) is the Wagner group ... and if they have a stronger impact then it will not be possible to continue with those large numbers of troops from us," she said, adding that the Swedish parliament would debate Mali next week.

"Of course it will have consequences."

A French military source said Sweden had always planned to withdraw troops after two years and that its mandate ended in March. The source said Swedish officers would remain part of the mission.

The European Union will impose sanctions on Mali in line with measures already taken by the ECOWAS grouping of West African states over the junta's delay in holding elections following a 2020 coup, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said on Thursday.

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HEADLINE	01/13 Rockets target US embassy in Baghdad
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/world/middleeast/baghdad-embassy-rockets-iran.html
GIST	<p>BAGHDAD — Four rockets targeted the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad on Thursday night, the latest in a series of aerial attacks amid Iranian threats and political violence as Iraq's factions struggle to form a new government.</p> <p>The Iraqi military said one rocket had landed inside a school across the street from the U.S. Embassy in the heavily fortified Green Zone, with shock waves from the blast slightly wounding an Iraqi child and an Iraqi soldier. There were no immediate reports of casualties or details about damage from the other three rockets.</p> <p>The U.S. embassy said on Twitter that its compound had been attacked "by terrorist groups attempting to undermine Iraq's security, sovereignty and international relations."</p> <p>"We have long said that these sorts of reprehensible attacks are an assault not just on diplomatic facilities, but on the sovereignty of Iraq itself," the embassy's post said.</p> <p>In Washington, a Pentagon spokesman, John F. Kirby, said "a relatively small number" of rockets had struck the Green Zone and that U.S. officials were still assessing the damage.</p> <p>The rockets were launched against the backdrop of a spate of rocket and drone strikes against American personnel in Iraq and Syria that Biden administration officials have attributed to Iran-backed militias.</p>

Asked if the United States would retaliate for the latest barrage, Mr. Kirby would not specify what response, if any, was possible.

“I’ve said this before, we’re going to do what we have to do to protect our people,” Mr. Kirby told reporters. “If and when we respond, we’re going to pick the time and place of our choosing. We’re certainly mindful that these attacks continue. They are obviously meant to cause harm, if not death, to our people, and we take that very, very seriously.”

He added: “We have made it clear in other channels to the Iranians how seriously we’re taking this.”

Iraqi officials have said the United States has sent messages through Iraq to Iran with warnings that it would retaliate for further attacks.

The rockets fired Thursday activated the embassy’s [counter-rocket, artillery, mortar defensive system](#), designed to detect and intercept incoming projectiles. In neighborhoods near the Green Zone, some residents watched from gardens and rooftops as midair rounds from the system exploded in flashes of red. The thud of rockets landing sent others rushing indoors to take cover.

An official from the American-led anti-ISIS coalition said Iraqi security forces had informed it that they had found the rocket launcher under a bridge in the Dora neighborhood in south Baghdad.

There were no claims of responsibility. But attacks on U.S. military bases have [increased since the beginning of January](#) around the anniversary of the U.S. drone strike that killed both [Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani](#) of Iran and a senior Iraqi security official in Baghdad in 2020. Iran and Iranian-backed militias in Iraq say they have not yet exacted revenge for the assassination of General Suleimani.

Shiite political factions, some with armed wings, have been splintering following Iraqi elections in October in which supporters of the Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr won the largest number of seats. Mr. al-Sadr, considered an Iraqi nationalist, opposes interference from both Iran and the United States in Iraq.

In a Twitter post on Thursday night, Mr. al-Sadr blamed Iranian-backed factions for the rocket attacks, saying they were trying to justify their existence by attacking American interests.

The first session of the new parliament on Sunday, aimed at choosing a speaker, ended in turmoil after the most senior member of parliament collapsed and was taken to a hospital after he said he had been pushed by Sadrist members.

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HEADLINE	01/13 Taliban grapple w/challenges of governance
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/world/taliban-members.html
GIST	<p>KARACHI, Pakistan — It was 20 years ago when the jihadi, a defense ministry official in the Taliban’s first government, fled Afghanistan as U.S. troops swept into the country. He settled in southwestern Pakistan with other Afghans, bought a house and became a baker.</p> <p>Then, after Kabul fell to the Taliban last August, Khyal Mohammad Ghayoor received a call from a stranger who identified himself only by the dual honorifics, Hajji Sahib, which roughly translates to a distinguished man who has made a pilgrimage to Mecca. The man told Mr. Ghayoor he was needed back in Afghanistan, not as a baker but as a police chief.</p> <p>Now, Mr. Ghayoor oversees 1,450 people as the head of Kabul’s traffic police.</p> <p>“I am very excited to be back in a free and liberated Afghanistan,” he said.</p> <p>Five months after their takeover of Afghanistan, the Taliban are grappling with the challenges of governance. Leaders promised to retain civil servants and prioritize ethnic diversity for top government</p>

roles, but instead have filled positions at all management levels with soldiers and theologians. Other government employees have fled or refused to work, leaving widespread vacancies in the fragile state.

To help fill the gaps, Taliban officials are reaching into Pakistan. For years, Pakistan officially denied the existence of Mr. Ghayoor and thousands of other ex-Taliban fighters quietly living within its borders. Now, the Taliban are privately recruiting them to return and work in the new government.

It is unclear how many former fighters have returned from Pakistan, but there have already been several high-profile appointments, including Mr. Ghayoor.

Arsala Kharoti, who had been working as a community organizer at a refugee camp in Pakistan, is now the deputy minister of refugees. Mawlawi Saeedullah, a preacher at a mosque in a Karachi slum, was appointed to a district judge position in Afghanistan's eastern province of Paktika, resuming a job he gave up in 2001.

The new hires are walking into a mounting catastrophe. Hunger is rampant. Many teachers and other public sector employees have not been paid in months. The millions of dollars in aid that helped prop up the previous government have vanished, billions in state assets are frozen and economic sanctions have led to a near collapse of the country's banking system.

"Running insurgency and state are two different things," said Noor Khan, 40, an accountant who fled Kabul for Islamabad in early September, among hundreds of other Afghan professionals hoping for asylum in Europe.

In the first weeks of the Taliban's takeover, roughly 120,000 people — including civil servants, bankers, academics and doctors — fled through airlifts organized by the United States and other foreign countries. Zabihullah Mujahid, Taliban spokesman, recognizing the personnel challenges the new government would face, tried to convince the United States to suspend its evacuation process in August.

"Afghanistan needs the expertise of its skilled people," he said. "They should not be taken to other countries."

A similar mass exodus of Afghanistan's professional class occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, when the Soviets withdrew and the Taliban wrested control from the warlords who filled the leadership vacuum.

Then as now, the Taliban preferred filling the government ranks with jihadis and loyalists. But this time, some civil servants have also stopped showing up for work, several of them said in interviews, either because they are not being paid, or because they do not want to taint their pending asylum cases in the United States or Europe by working for the Taliban.

With any new regime comes new appointees, but the difference in Afghanistan is that the new government had operated as a hard-line Islamic insurgency for two decades, so the cadre of people they are plucking leaders from are soldiers and religious scholars, rather than political allies or technocrats.

Many of the selected theologians are graduates of Darul Uloom Haqqania madrasa, one of Pakistan's oldest and largest Islamic seminaries.

Sirajuddin Haqqani, head of the militant Haqqani network and labeled a terrorist by the F.B.I., was appointed acting minister of the interior, overseeing police, intelligence and other security forces.

The new head of administrative affairs at the Education Ministry, also a mullah, wore a cartridge belt to his appointment ceremony in December.

Gaps in governance have started to show, including at Salaam, a state-run telecommunications company that, before the takeover, the Taliban routinely threatened and accused of providing intelligence about them to the former government.

“They have no experience to run the departments,” said Basir Jan, a company employee. “They sit in the offices with guns and abuse the employees in the departments by calling them ‘corrupt’ and ‘facilitators of the invaders.’”

Enayat Alokozai, a spokesman for the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, denied these accusation and said Salaam’s service had improved under the Taliban. “All technical staff are in place and they do their routine duties,” he said.

Taliban leaders blame the United States for the collapsing economy. But some analysts say that even if the United States unfreezes Afghanistan’s state assets and lifts sanctions, the Finance Ministry does not have the technical know-how to revive the country’s broken banking system.

“Their response to the catastrophic economic situation is ‘It’s not our fault, the internationals are holding the money back.’ But the reality is that they don’t have the capacity for this kind of day-to-day technical operation,” said Vanda Felbab-Brown, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

“One motivation to bring the people back from Pakistan is to offset the image of a brain drain,” she said.

Wahidullah Hashimi, a senior member of the Taliban’s council for training and educating soldiers, said that staffing problems stemmed from corruption within the last administration, and a foreign conspiracy to starve Afghanistan of talent — rather than the Taliban’s own dearth of it.

“Foreigners intentionally evacuated Afghans, most importantly, the educated and professional ones, to weaken the Islamic Emirates and undermine our administration,” Mr. Hashimi said.

“We are in touch with some Afghans in different parts of the world and are encouraging them to return to Afghanistan because we desperately need their help and expertise to help their people and government,” he said.

Former government employees say they worry that conditions in Afghanistan, already dire, could become catastrophic. Some of the Taliban returnees share this concern: As many as several dozen new government officials are keeping their families and properties in Karachi, according to Afghan refugee community leaders in the city.

Saeedullah, 45, did not fully pull up stakes when he returned to Afghanistan. Only half his family came along, according to Matiullah, a relative who stayed behind in Karachi and goes by only one name.

“The situation is still uncertain in Afghanistan and therefore we advised Saeedullah not to sell his properties in Pakistan,” he said. “Saeedullah’s two sons have been living with their families and running clothes shops in an upscale market in Karachi.” Saeedullah could not be reached for comment.

Abubakar Siddique, a journalist and author, said the Taliban remain dependent on Pakistan, despite their new grip on power in Afghanistan.

“They still consider it a safe haven to retreat to if things go sour in Afghanistan,” Mr. Siddique said. “Obviously, the Taliban leaders and mid-ranking functionaries do not want to risk all by bringing their families into a country that many Afghans are eager to leave.”

Mr. Ghayoor, the baker turned police chief, said that Kabul changed markedly in the two decades that he was away. As part of his duties, he tries to instill order at a busy produce market in Kabul as vendors tout fruit and vegetables, and taxi drivers call out stops, looking for fares.

“There is so much traffic, so many street vendors, and the drivers don’t even listen to me when I ask them to move,” he said, exasperated. “When I ask a street vendor to leave this spot and move on, he tells me,

	<p>‘What should we eat?’ I asked them, ‘What did you do with all the dollars the Americans were pouring into this country?’”</p> <p>Mr. Ghayoor said in December that neither he nor any other member of the Kabul police force had been paid in months. Nevertheless, he said he decided to sell his bakery in Quetta, a city in southwestern Pakistan, and move his extended family, including nine children, to Kabul.</p> <p>“The international community used to say it would be impossible for the Taliban to fight these strong forces, let alone taking over the government,” Mr. Ghayoor said, adding, “Yet, our operation is going pretty smooth.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 UN: millions of Afghans on ‘verge of death’
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/chief-warns-millions-afghans-verge-death-82247628
GIST	<p>UNITED NATIONS -- The United Nations chief warned Thursday that millions of Afghans are on the “verge of death,” urging the international community to fund the U.N.’s \$5 billion humanitarian appeal, release Afghanistan’s frozen assets and jump-start its banking system to avert economic and social collapse.</p> <p>Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told reporters that “freezing temperatures and frozen assets are a lethal combination for the people of Afghanistan,” and “rules and conditions that prevent money from being used to save lives and the economy must be suspended in this emergency situation.”</p> <p>Afghanistan’s aid-dependent economy was already stumbling when the Taliban seized power in mid-August amid the chaotic departure of U.S. and NATO troops after 20 years. The international community froze Afghanistan’s assets abroad and halted economic support, unwilling to work with the Taliban, given their reputation for brutality during their 1996-2001 rule and refusal to educate girls and allow women to work.</p> <p>The U.N. says 8.7 million Afghans are on the brink of starvation and Guterres said it’s critical to rapidly inject liquidity into the Afghan economy “and avoid a meltdown that would lead to poverty, hunger and destitution for millions.”</p> <p>It’s “absolutely essential” to avoid a breakdown, he stressed, “because with the present situation you have Afghans on the verge of death.”</p> <p>The secretary-general said the United States has “a very important role to play because most of the financial system in the world operates in dollars” and the United States has frozen \$7 billion in Afghan foreign reserves, mainly held in the U.S.</p> <p>U.N. humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths and Peter Maurer, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, are scheduled to hold a virtual meeting Friday with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken.</p> <p>Guterres said one reason for the meeting is to try and create “mechanisms that allow for an effective injection of funds into the Afghan economy and, at the same time, create the conditions for the financial system in Afghanistan to be able to operate in the local currency.”</p> <p>The U.N. chief said international funding should be allowed to pay the salaries of doctors, sanitation workers, electrical engineers and other civil servants as well as help Afghan institutions deliver health care, education and other key services.</p> <p>Last month, the World Bank transferred \$280 million from a reconstruction trust fund it administers for Afghanistan to the U.N. children’s agency, UNICEF, and the World Food Program for their operations in the country, Guterres said.</p>

"I hope the remaining resources — more than \$1.2 billion — will become available to help Afghanistan's people survive the winter," he said.

While appealing to the international community to support the Afghan people, Guterres said he was making an equally urgent appeal to Taliban leaders "to recognize and protect the fundamental human rights, and in particular the rights of women and girls," and to build government institutions in which all Afghans feel represented.

"Across Afghanistan, women and girls are missing from offices and classrooms," Guterres said. "No country can thrive while denying the rights of half of its population."

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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	01/13 Food safety investigations Covid casualty?
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/jesse-jones/food-safety-investigations-another-casualty-covid-19-pandemic/CVI7T7NX5VENVBZYWOQK7TM5TQ/
GIST	<p>Seattle, WA — It was an unboxing of an outbreak. Just last month the CDC reported that 10 people in four states, including six in Washington, fell ill after eating processed salad products that were contaminated with E. Coli.</p> <p>Attorney Bill Marler has taken on food safety cases for more than 30 years. He says he's now seeing something very concerning in the industry.</p> <p>"Covid has had an impact on the ability for public health to actually surveil foodborne illnesses," Marler says.</p> <p>According to the Washington Department of Health, the number of foodborne outbreaks have dropped significantly in Washington state from a high of 62 in 2018 to 17 in 2020.</p> <p>"And we're going to see, when the CDC does - and state health authorities - do, what's happened in 2020 and 2021, it's going to look like gosh! Foodborne illnesses are down. But the reason they're down is not necessarily they're down but they're just not caught," Marler explains.</p> <p>Marler also adds that many people are afraid to go to the hospital because of COVID.</p> <p>"The way foodborne illness outbreaks happen is that people have to get sick and go to a doctor and get tested. I can tell you that there is a lot of cases that I had throughout the last two years where people have not gone to the doctor and not gotten tested," Marler says.</p> <p>A spokesperson with the Washington Department of Health says it is possible that foodborne illnesses are underreported during the pandemic and that sick people are reluctant to seek healthcare with concerns about COVID.</p> <p>However, they add in a statement that their teams are back to pre-pandemic staffing:</p> <p>"Many of our foodborne outbreak investigation epidemiologists were deployed to COVID response in the beginning of the pandemic. Since fall of 2020, all foodborne staff have returned to foodborne work."</p> <p>We contacted the health departments in the Puget Sound region's most populous counties: Whatcom, Snohomish, King, Pierce, and Thurston. All say their food safety teams are back to full strength.</p> <p>But that leads to the federal question: are inspections actually taking place on a national basis?</p>

“And that includes FDA not doing inspections on the ground. They’re doing inspections like you and me are doing an inspection. They’re doing them virtually. And that’s problematic at best,” Marler says.

The FDA admits it is doing remote inspections. But it is sending inspectors on “mission critical” incidents like the Dole packaged salad voluntary recall. The agency says it’s a listeria outbreak that sickened 16 people from 13 states.

So what can you do to protect yourself? And what does ‘washed and bagged’ and all this stuff really mean if people are still getting sick?

“Lettuce is grown outside. And there’s no kill step. You don’t cook lettuce. And you wash it because washing lettuce knocks down the bacterial load, takes some bacteria off it,” Marler says.

Marler’s advice is to stay away from the pre-cut, pre-bagged products.

“I think the best thing to do for consumers is buy a head of lettuce, buy a head of spinach and wash it yourself. You know, take some control of it yourself. Skip the bagged product,” he says.

Part of the reason the numbers are down is that restaurant visits are down. So are big gatherings. But with the surge of Omicron, the future is uncertain.

So - wash your hands. Wash your greens. And check out the CDC’s steps to food safety.

You can also help out investigators by using your grocery store’s loyalty card. If you do get sick, it could help track down the source if you don’t keep all your receipts.

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HEADLINE	01/13 Center for Covid Control pause locations
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/center-for-covid-control-to-pause-testing-nationwide-after-locations-shut-down-in-2-states
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - The Center for Covid Control announced it is "pausing operations" at all of its 300 testing locations until Jan. 22 after widespread reports of consumer complaints and allegations of fake tests.</p> <p>On Wednesday, FOX 13 News reported that the Better Business Bureau was investigating the Illinois-based COVID-19 testing company that is being inundated with negative reviews and complaints. The Washington Attorney General received at least two complaints.</p> <p>Some of the complaints on the BBB's website accuse the company of scamming customers. Many of them say they've not received test results.</p> <p>On Wednesday, the city of Lakewood shut down one of the center's testing sites after investigators found that it was operating without a business license.</p> <p>"The Washington State Department of Health and the Office of the Attorney General are both aware of national interest in the business," the city wrote in a press release. "The City has no present knowledge of impropriety at this location beyond operation without a business license."</p> <p>"When you are conducting testing at the height of this pandemic, and you are collecting personal information on thousands of our residents, and you don't have a \$73 business license, that was cause for concern," said Jim Kopriva with the City of Lakewood.</p> <p>Workers at two of the clinics in Seattle refused to speak with FOX 13 News on Wednesday. By Thursday morning, the International District and Queen Anne locations were closed, and the Bellevue site was open for appointments only.</p>

"I'm worried because I have to get a rapid test today," said Dan, who was hoping to get a test in Lakewood. "I was kind of sad because I thought they were open, I'd seen a line of people around here the other day ... and now they (are) closed."

Later Thursday, the Center for Covid Control announced it was pausing further testing at all locations from Jan. 14 to Jan. 22.

"We've made this difficult decision to temporarily pause all operations, until we are confident that all collection sites are meeting our high standards for quality," said CCC founder and CEO Aleya Siyaj.

CCC said it would use the time "for additional staff training in sample collection and handling, a refocus on customer service and communication practices, and ensure compliance with regulatory guidelines."

The company operates nearly a dozen testing sites in [Washington state](#) and 300 in the country.

CCC also cited the omicron variant as a "key contributing factor" to challenges faced by its 3,000 frontline workers.

"For this, we truly apologize and are committed to resolve these recent customer inconveniences and loss of confidence," said Siyaj.

Now people searching for a rapid test will have to go elsewhere.

"Well, I'm going to look for another one - a legitimate one - or call my doctor and see if I can get one scheduled with them," said Dan.

A Department of Health spokesperson said allegations of bogus COVID tests is a top priority for the department, saying The Center for Covid Control is not licensed by the Department of Health and believe the company is not testing in the state - only collecting samples and it cannot verify if the company is handling those specimens properly.

Complaints across America

In Oregon, one family raised a red flag about a testing site in the Portland area. They told [KOIN-TV](#) that the whole experience "seemed a bit sketchy." They said they were told to put their PCR tests into a bin that resembled a garbage bin. Their tests came back negative except for one that never returned a result. To be safe, they were tested again and found out that they were positive.

Another family in Florida told [WINK-TV](#) that they received their test results will still waiting in line to be tested. KOIN also reports that the Department of Justice has opened a civil investigation into the company.

Three testing sites in Massachusetts were ordered to shut down for performing tests "without the required state approvals," according to [USA Today](#).

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of the Inspector General said there has been an [increase in COVID-19 fraud complaints](#) including many related to testing.

"We are seeing fraudulent activity around testing. It could be random pop-up sites, and it could be at-home test kits," Yvonne Gamble, the office's acting director of communications, told USA Today. "Be vigilant. Be careful. Be mindful, and make sure whoever you are dealing with is an authorized provider and a place that you can trust."

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HEADLINE	01/13 Australia hits 123 degrees; ties record heat
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2022/01/13/australia-southern-hemisphere-temperature-record/

The Southern Hemisphere may have just matched its hottest temperature on record Thursday. A station in Onslow, a small coastal town in Western Australia, registered a sweltering 123.3 degrees (50.7 degrees Celsius) amid a [severe heat wave](#).

The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) has begun a meticulous review of the temperature reading. If verified, it would tie the all-time high reading set in Oodnadatta, Australia, on Jan. 2, 1960.

A massive heat dome was parked over Western Australia, with Onslow sitting directly underneath it. Temperatures were about 20 degrees Fahrenheit (11 degrees Celsius) above normal at the hottest time of year.

“Considering the increasing temperature trends over the past decades, it is less surprising that we see extreme temperatures like the one in Western Australia at the moment,” wrote Nina Ridder, researcher at the Centre of Excellence for Climate Extremes at the University of New South Wales at Sydney.

Western Australia is currently coming off its third-warmest December in 2021. Ridder said mean sea surface temperatures in northwest Western Australia have also been above average — about 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit (2 degrees Celsius) higher in December 2021 than average — and could have detrimental effects on marine ecosystems, such as inducing coral bleaching.

The extreme temperature arrives the same week that several of the world’s top climate research institutions announced the past seven years have been the [hottest in recorded history](#). In that time, temperature records have been broken across the world. The WMO has four ongoing investigations, having just completed another.

“Since the creation of the WMO World Archive of Weather and Climate Extremes in 2007, we have never had so many ongoing verification/evaluations as we currently do,” Randy Cervený, who leads the World Meteorological Organization’s weather and climate extremes team, wrote in an email.

Here is a select list of verified and unverified national and international record-breaking temperatures (in recorded history) in just the past two years:

- World’s [hottest year](#) at 1.08 degrees (0.6 degrees Celsius) warmer than 1981-2010 average: 2020 tied with 2016
- World’s [hottest month](#) at 1.67 degrees (0.93 degrees Celsius) above the 20th-century average: July 2021
- World’s hottest (and North America’s hottest) reliable temperature at [129.9 degrees](#) (54.4 degrees Celsius), at least since 1931: Death Valley, Calif., Aug. 16, 2020, and July 9, 2021
- Arctic’s hottest temperature at [100.4 degrees](#) Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius): Verkhoyansk, Russia, June 20, 2020.
- Antarctica’s coldest season with an average of [minus-78 degrees](#) Fahrenheit (minus-61 Celsius): 2021
- Europe’s hottest temperature at [119.8 degrees](#) Fahrenheit (48.8 degrees Celsius): Syracuse, Italy, Aug. 11, 2021
- Canada’s hottest temperature at [121 degrees](#) Fahrenheit (49.6 degrees Celsius): Lytton, B.C., June 29, 2021
- Turkey’s hottest temperature at 120.4 degrees Fahrenheit (49.1 degrees Celsius): Cizre, July 20, 2021
- Spain’s hottest temperature at [117 degrees](#) Fahrenheit (47.4 degrees Celsius): Montoro, Aug. 14, 2021
- Greece’s hottest temperature at 115.3 degrees Fahrenheit (46.3 degrees Celsius): Makrakomi, Aug. 2, 2021
- Paraguay’s hottest temperature at 113.9 degrees Fahrenheit (45.5 degrees Celsius): Pozo Hondo, Sept. 26, 2020
- Oman’s hottest temperature at 124.9 degrees Fahrenheit (51.6 degrees Celsius): Joba, June 16, 2021

- United Arab Emirates tied hottest temperature at 125.2 degrees Fahrenheit (51.8 degrees Celsius): Sweihan, June 6, 2021
- Iraq's hottest temperature at [125.2 degrees](#) Fahrenheit (51.8 degrees Celsius): Baghdad, July 28, 2020
- Cuba's hottest temperature at 102.7 degrees Fahrenheit (39.3 degrees Celsius): Veguitas, Aug. 11, 2020
- Ghana's hottest temperature at 111.2 degrees Fahrenheit (44 degrees Celsius): Navrongo, April 6, 2020
- Lebanon's hottest temperature at 113.7 degrees Fahrenheit (45.4 degrees Celsius): Houche Al Oumara, July 27, 2020
- Contiguous United States' warmest December with an average of [39.3 degrees](#) Fahrenheit (4 degrees Celsius): 2021

According to climatologist Maximiliano Herrera, in all, [10 different countries tied or broke national heat records in 2021](#) (Morocco, Taiwan, Tunisia and Dominica, in addition to those listed above).

Those extremes are just scratching the surface. Outside of national or international records, unprecedented extremes are occurring in local communities and at smaller time scales as well. Cervený said local high temperatures are being “exceeded much more frequently than low-temperature records.”

Herrera documented [400 weather stations in communities or outposts worldwide](#) that established all-time high temperatures in 2021.

“We are seeing more frequent extremes in temperature,” Cervený wrote. “The climate that we have lived through over the past decades is changing and we must be aware of that — and realize those fundamental changes have consequences to our way of life.”

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HEADLINE	01/13 Data: 25% world population had record heat
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jan/13/hot-year-temperatures-climate-crisis-2021
GIST	<p>Nearly a quarter of the world's population experienced a record hot year in 2021, as the climate crisis continues to unleash escalating temperatures around the globe, according to new data from leading US climate scientists.</p> <p>Last year was the sixth hottest ever recorded, with the global temperature 1.1C above the pre-industrial average, a new annual analysis from Nasa and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (Noaa) found.</p> <p>“Science leaves no room for doubt: climate change is the existential threat of our time,” said Bill Nelson, administrator of Nasa. Nelson said that eight out of the top 10 hottest years have occurred in the past decade, which “underscores the need for bold action to safeguard the future of our country – and all of humanity”.</p> <p>There were record-high temperatures in parts of northern Africa, south Asia and parts of South America last year, Arctic sea ice continued its decline and the oceans recorded yet another record year for heat content. “The oceans are storing a heck of a lot of heat,” said Russell Vose, a senior climate scientist at Noaa. “If it weren't for the large heat storage capacity of the oceans, the atmosphere would've warmed a lot more rapidly.”</p> <p>Gavin Schmidt, director of Nasa's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, said the changes under way in the Arctic, which is warming at about three times the rate of the global average, are “extremely dramatic” and will affect the rest of the world through, among other things, sea-level rise from melting glaciers. “What happens in the Arctic doesn't stay in the Arctic,” he said.</p>

While 2021 did not top the record heat set in 2020, which was only fractionally hotter than 2016, scientists said last year was yet another demonstration of the long-term global heating that is being caused by human activity, such as burning fossil fuels and deforestation. The concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is [now at levels](#) not seen on Earth in the past 4m years.

“It doesn’t matter how you do the analysis, it shows you the Earth has warmed quite dramatically,” said Vose. NOAA and NASA undertake their own temperature analyses in slightly different ways, using data from weather stations, ships and ocean buoys.

“It’s clear that each of the past four decades has been warmer than the one preceding it,” he added. “It’s certainly warmer now than at any time in the past 2,000 years, and probably longer.”

Earlier this week, the European climate agency Copernicus said 2021 was the fifth hottest year on record, with the last seven years the hottest ever documented. A slight edge was taken off last year’s temperatures by a La Niña, a periodic climatic event that cools the waters of the Pacific Ocean.

Despite not being the hottest individual year on record, 2021 did contain a number of extraordinary signs of climate breakdown. July last year was the world’s hottest month [ever recorded](#), with Death Valley in California recording what may be the hottest temperature ever reliably measured during this month, at 54.4C (130F).

A total of 1.8 billion people, approaching a quarter of the world’s population, live in countries that did experience the hottest year on record, according to a separate analysis released on Thursday by Berkeley Earth. A total of 25 countries, including China, Nigeria and Iran, recorded a record warm annual average in 2021.

“No one lives at the global average temperature,” said Robert Rohde, lead scientist at Berkeley Earth. “Most land areas will experience more warming than the global average, and countries must plan their responses to this.”

Last year also saw a cascade of disasters that scientists have determined were worsened by the world’s excess heat. Floods devastated parts of Germany and China, while the Pacific north-west of North America saw an unprecedented, and deadly, heatwave that scientists said would have been “virtually impossible” without climate change.

“What terrifies me ... is that these facts and figures are no longer surprising or shocking,” said Kristina Dahl, a senior climate scientist at the Union of Concerned Scientists. “Rising temperatures are already triggering dire impacts worldwide, and will only worsen as the planet warms.”

The world’s governments agreed in the Paris climate accords to limit the global temperature rise to 1.5C above pre-industrial times to avoid disastrous climate change but this threshold is now in view, Vose said, with a 50% chance at least one year this decade will hit 1.5C and the average temperature to reach this level “sometime in the 2030s and certainly by the 2040s” if planet-heating emissions are not cut.

2022 will probably be in the top 10 hottest years, with a small chance of it being the hottest year on record “without something like a volcano erupting or a comet slamming into Earth”, Vose said.

Schmidt said the impact of global heating will continue to worsen as the world warms further. “We are already seeing the impacts in local weather events and extremes such as heatwaves and intense precipitation,” he said.

“We’ve reached a point where this is not just an academic measure of what’s going on. It’s now being reflected in weather and events we are seeing.”

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SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/14/worlds-poorest-bear-brunt-of-climate-crisis-10-underreported-emergencies
GIST	<p>From Afghanistan to Ethiopia, about 235 million people worldwide needed assistance in 2021. But while some crises received global attention, others are lesser known.</p> <p>Humanitarian organisation Care International has published its annual report of the 10 countries that had the least attention in online articles in five languages around the world in 2021, despite each having at least 1 million people affected by conflict or climate disasters.</p> <p>The findings, from a collaboration between the charity and international media monitoring service Meltwater, highlighted how the accelerating climate crisis is fuelling many of the world's emergencies, said Laurie Lee, CEO of Care International UK.</p> <p>"There is deep injustice at the heart of it. The world's poorest are bearing the brunt of climate change – poverty, migration, hunger, gender inequality and ever more scarce resources – despite having done the least to cause it," he said. "Add Covid-19 into the mix and we see decades of progress towards tackling inequality, poverty, conflict and hunger disappearing before our eyes."</p> <p>The number of people in need of humanitarian aid is expected to rise to 274 million this year, or one in 28 people, and more than 84 million people have been uprooted. Lee highlighted the impact of the UK's 2021 foreign aid budget cuts, saying that it "resulted in over £166m less in humanitarian aid reaching the 10 countries mentioned in this report compared to 2019."</p> <p>Zambia</p> <p>First on the list, Zambia has 1.2 million malnourished people and about 60% of the 18.4 million population living below the international poverty line of \$1.90 (£1.40) a day. Women produce 60% of the country's food supply, but families headed by women faced higher poverty rates than those headed by men.</p> <p>Food insecurity in Zambia has primarily been blamed on prolonged drought, but rising corn prices and flooding have contributed.</p> <p>Ukraine</p> <p>Currently in the news amid renewed tension between Russia and the west, in Ukraine, 3.4 million people were in need of assistance in 2021, after years of conflict.</p> <p>"While a comprehensive political solution for the conflict is still not in sight, people in eastern Ukraine are daily forced to put their lives on the line. Along the 420-km 'contact line' that separates Ukrainian government-controlled territory from that of the separatists, the situation is particularly dangerous," the report said.</p> <p>Malawi</p> <p>Malawi is facing a food insecurity crisis, with 17% of the population severely malnourished. Droughts, floods and landslides have been predicted to worsen over the coming years. Cyclone Idai in 2019 severely affected harvests and left tens of thousands displaced.</p> <p>"The climate crisis is hitting people here earlier and much harder than the people of the global north," said Chikondi Chabvuta, advocacy lead for Care International in Malawi. "We are already seeing real-life consequences with delayed rainfall, heavy and destructive rainfall, unpredictable rainfall patterns, infertile soil, destroyed harvests."</p> <p>Central African Republic</p> <p>In Central African Republic (CAR), where civil war has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, half of the population face food insecurity. A ceasefire agreement struck in October 2021 is fragile and more than 700,000 people have been internally displaced – more than half children. CAR is ranked second to last</p>

globally on the Human Development Index. “On average, a child attends school for just under four years, and girls for only three,” the report said. About 30% of children are in work.

Guatemala

Poverty, violence and the climate crisis are leading problems in Guatemala, which is on the [migratory route to Mexico and the US](#). Two-thirds of the population live on less than \$2 a day and 38% of the population face food insecurity.

Camps sheltering those sent back by Mexico are overcrowded, meaning many live on the streets, the report said. Guatemala is considered one of the world’s [most dangerous countries](#), with 3,500 murders in 2020 alone. “Although about 3.3 million people in the country rely on humanitarian aid, the frequent occurrence of violence is in many cases a barrier to accessing urgently needed assistance,” said the report.

Colombia

Nearly 5 million people live [under the control of armed groups](#), and 6.7 million people are dependent on humanitarian aid.

Food insecurity has been blamed on an economic recession caused by the pandemic. It has particularly affected indigenous communities, those uprooted internally and 1.8 million [Venezuelan refugees](#), mainly in northern Colombia.

Burundi

Ranked as the country gaining the least attention in 2020, [Burundi](#) was seventh in 2021 when 2.3 million of the 12.6 million population were in need of humanitarian assistance.

The country secured only 27% of the \$195m pledged in aid. [Extreme weather](#), hunger and political unrest were among the challenges faced by Burundians. In a country where 90% of people rely on small-scale agriculture, only a third of land is suitable for cultivation, due to drought, floods and landslides. The report also highlighted structural discrimination against women – 20% of those in Burundi’s decision-making bodies are female, while 60% of the agricultural workforce are women.

Niger

Niger is deeply vulnerable to climate disasters. Persistent droughts and recurring floods have had [catastrophic consequences](#): nearly 3 million people rely on humanitarian aid. About 1.8 million children need food assistance and almost half of all children under five are malnourished.

Militias in eastern and northern [Niger](#) have caused 313,000 people to be displaced as of last September. “Providing emergency relief is often hindered by the fact that infrastructure is destroyed, operation areas are marked by violence and rural areas are difficult to access,” the report said.

Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe has acute food insecurity with increasingly extreme climate conditions and economic mismanagement causing 6.6 million people to need humanitarian aid. More than a third of the population (5.7 million) lack sufficient food.

“The harvests in many rural areas are not sufficient to secure basic food supplies and other needs. In these regions, households must rely on local markets when supplies are depleted – but the prices there are [unaffordable for many](#),” the report said.

Honduras

Poverty and violence have exacerbated the humanitarian situation in [Honduras](#), prompting many to leave for the US. About 70% of the population live in poverty, according to a 2020 study.

There have been problems with farming due to [drought, hurricanes and floods](#). The country has 937,000 displaced people, the highest number in Latin America.

	“In Honduras, people therefore often talk about poverty being female, as it is mostly women who stay behind with the children,” the report said.
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HEADLINE	01/13 NOAA: 2021 6th warmest year on record
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/2021-6th-warmest-year-record-noaa/story?id=82246181
GIST	<p>Last year was one of the warmest in recorded history amid a four-decade warming trend, scientists have learned.</p> <p>The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and NASA announced in a joint press conference Thursday that 2021 was the 6th-warmest history, but emphasized that it is the overall warming, not the rankings of each individual year, that validates the continued warming on Earth.</p> <p>Many independent scientific groups, some with different methodologies, have been finding the similar results of a progressively warming trend year after year for the past four decades, NOAA Chief of Climate Monitoring Russell Vose told reporters at the joint press conference with NASA.</p> <p>While La Nina in the eastern Pacific slightly cooled global temperatures in 2021, the greatest warming occurred in the northern hemisphere -- both on land and in the Arctic, Vose said.</p> <p>Climate change is at least partially responsible for some of the extreme weather events that occurred in 2021, both agencies concluded. More heat in the ocean and atmosphere will lead to more extreme events, like heat waves and intense rainfall.</p> <p>High ocean heat content was also a noted concern, as ocean water absorbs more than 90% of excess heat content, according to NOAA. Ocean heating a top climate change concern due to its effect on causing geographic shifts of ecosystems, sea level rise and fueling extreme storms, experts told ABC News.</p> <p>The average global temperature will likely exceed 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels, the conservative measure of the Paris Agreement, by the 2030s or 2040s, both agencies said. If emissions continue as business as usual, climate change is projected to quadruple U.S. outdoor workers’ exposure to hazardous heat conditions between now and 2065, which will jeopardize their health and risk loss of \$55.4 billion in earnings annually, according to a new study by the Union of Concerned Scientists published Thursday.</p> <p>The release of the data is terrifying because it is "no longer surprising or shocking," Kristina Dahl, senior climate scientist at the Union of Concerned Scientists, said in a statement.</p> <p>"Rising temperatures are already triggering dire impacts worldwide and will only worsen as the planet warms," Dahl said. "Scientific research shows the deadly 2021 Pacific Northwest heat wave, for example, would've been virtually impossible without climate change."</p> <p>Temperatures will keep rising unless drastic cuts to emissions from greenhouse gases are made, NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies Director Gavin Schmidt said. "Every little bit counts" in the race to reduce emissions, Schmidt said, adding that it's not too late to start.</p> <p>Dahl called on policymakers to "take decisive actions and pass policies that sharply rein in heat-trapping emissions, such as the Build Back Better Act."</p> <p>"Failure to act together with the global community will all but ensure more devastating impacts and even irreversible climate tipping points," Dahl said. "In 2022, we need bold leaders who prioritize the well-being of people and the planet, not incrementalism or regression from those beholden to the fossil fuel industry."</p>
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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	01/13 Graham: standoff shopping complex; arrest
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/burglary-suspect-arrested-after-hours-long-standoff-at-graham-shopping-center
GIST	<p>GRAHAM, Wash. - A burglary suspect is now in custody after an hours-long standoff at a Graham shopping complex Thursday morning.</p> <p>The incident happened near 224th Street East and Meridian.</p> <p>At about 6:45 a.m., deputies responded after a smoke shop owner reported seeing the suspect on his surveillance cameras.</p> <p>When deputies arrived, the suspect was in one of the businesses and wouldn't come out.</p> <p>After a few hours, deputies located the suspect, who was hiding in the rafters inside the business. They had to use ladders to get him down.</p> <p>The suspect, a 33-year-old man, was arrested and will be booked in the Pierce County Jail on suspicion of commercial burglary, resisting arrest and malicious mischief.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 New questions remote court testimony
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-st-louis-missouri-c95c23e01849594d2a6627456236e228
GIST	<p>An overturned conviction in Missouri is raising new questions about video testimony in criminal court cases nationwide, and the ruling could have ripple effects through a justice system increasingly reliant on remote technology as it struggles with a backlog of cases during the coronavirus pandemic.</p> <p>Missouri's highest court on Tuesday reversed the statutory rape conviction of Rodney Smith in a case from St. Louis, finding that an investigator's video testimony violated the defendant's Sixth Amendment right to confront the witnesses against him.</p> <p>The investigator appeared remotely in 2019 because he was on paternity leave, testifying that DNA evidence taken from the victim's clothing matched the defendant's DNA. The girl had since recanted her accusations, so the conviction and sentence of probation turned on the DNA evidence.</p> <p>Many state and federal courts halted all criminal trials for months during the pandemic, allowing remote trials only when defendants explicitly agreed to forfeit any rights to in-person confrontation of their accusers. The Missouri ruling differs from many pandemic-era cases because the judge went ahead despite the defendant's objections.</p> <p>State court systems typically handle millions of cases every year in total, the vast majority of which will not be directly affected by the legal questions raised in the Missouri ruling. The number of trials also plummeted during the pandemic. But even if that decision impacts only several hundred cases, it would mean yet more challenges for an already overburdened judiciary.</p> <p>The decision could eventually make this a test case for the U.S. Supreme Court, said Michael Wolff, a former chief justice of the Missouri Supreme Court and a professor at the St. Louis University School of Law.</p>

“This guy was convicted with the use of Zoom technology and could not have been convicted without it,” Wolff said. The nation’s highest court has allowed exemptions for child witness to testify remotely to shield them from a potentially traumatic experience, but “you still don’t get away from the fact that the Constitution says there’s a right to confrontation.”

The U.S. Supreme Court has grappled with the legal ramifications of remote testimony for decades, though the constitutional questions it raises have never been fully answered.

[A landmark ruling in Maryland v. Craig](#) in 1990 upheld a trial judge’s decision to let a victim of child abuse testify remotely. In a 5-4 decision, the court said the Sixth Amendment doesn’t guarantee an “absolute right” to in-person confrontations, especially if remote testimony “is necessary to further an important public policy.” It said lessening the trauma of testifying to a child was a compelling public interest.

The dissenters said the Constitution provided no wiggle room and that the point was “to place the witness under the sometimes hostile glare of the defendant.” Some of those same justices were in the majority 14 years later in [Crawford v. Washington](#), which asserted that the right to confront an accuser in person was near-to-absolute.

Recently, the [Minnesota State Court of Appeals](#) differed from the Missouri court by ruling that allowing a witness to testify via live, remote two-way video did not violate a defendant’s rights.

During the pandemic, multiple trial-level state and federal courts have displayed care in not appearing to trample on the principle, which dates to Roman times, that those accused of crimes that could cost them their freedom have a right to confront their accusers.

In August, [the Commonwealth of Kentucky Court of Appeals](#) upheld a lower court’s decision denying a prosecutor’s request to let one witness testify by video at a fraud trial from prison because traveling to court would put him and others at risk of getting COVID-19. The appeals court said “general concerns about the spread of the virus do not justify abridging a defendant’s right to in-person confrontation” and that prosecutors never proved the witness was particularly vulnerable to COVID-19.

“The fundamental question has been this: is a remote witness testifying by technology functionally the same as being there?” said Fredric Lederer, chancellor professor of law and director of the Center for Legal and Court Technology at William & Mary Law School. “We don’t know if this is constitutional at this point.”

Remote technology has helped drive down no-show rates in many areas by allowing people to attend even if they have to work or care for children, said David Slayton with the National Center for State Courts.

Still, especially in criminal proceedings, testifying in person can help show witnesses are speaking voluntarily. People often take body language into account as they are judging truthfulness, but research has raised serious questions about the widely held idea that people can gauge trustworthiness better in person, Lederer said.

“There really is no science to back that up,” he said. “At all. Quite the opposite.”

While the original Missouri case unfolded before the pandemic began, the use of remote video during court proceedings has expanded exponentially since it took hold.

“This potentially affects every criminal case in which a prosecutor wants to present a remote witness,” he said.

But in many pandemic-era proceedings, defendants have agreed to waive their Sixth Amendment rights so trials can go forward. The Missouri case was different in that the defendant objected to the investigator appearing remotely.

	<p>“If there was not an objection, I think the courts would be wary about upsetting the results of a conviction,” Wolff said.</p> <p>In St. Louis County, for example, prosecutors are confident in the convictions they have secured during the pandemic, largely because defendants waived the right to confront witnesses in person, said Chris King, spokesman for Prosecuting Attorney Wesley Bell. “So there should be no grounds for appeal,” King said.</p> <p>Defense attorney Nina McDonnell argued the recently decided Missouri case and said the ruling is especially important during the pandemic.</p> <p>“It makes it clear that it should be up to what rights (defendants) want to give up or maintain, not any other factor,” said McDonnell, an assistant public defender in St. Louis.</p> <p>Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic “we know it’s not the same thing” to have video testimony, McDonnell said. “That’s why courts are scrambling to reopen.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 Feds: encrypted messages w/militia leader
SOURCE	https://www.cnbc.com/2022/01/13/feds-say-they-used-encrypted-messages-to-charge-oath-keepers-leader.html
GIST	<p>Federal investigators say they accessed encrypted Signal messages sent before the Jan. 6, 2021, riot on the U.S. Capitol, and used them as evidence to charge the leader of Oath Keepers, an extremist far-right militia group, and other defendants in a seditious plot.</p> <p>In a legal complaint made public on Thursday, the Department of Justice alleges the defendants conspired to forcefully oppose the transfer of power between then-President Donald Trump to Joe Biden, including by trying to take control of the U.S. Capitol.</p> <p>The complaint references numerous messages sent on Signal, an end-to-end encrypted messaging app, raising questions about how authorities accessed them and recalling a longstanding point of tension between the law enforcement community and tech industry. Encryption scrambles messages for recipients so that no one else — not even the platform itself — can read them.</p> <p>It’s not clear how investigators gained access to the messages used in the arrest of the far-right group leader, Stewart Rhodes, and other defendants. Representatives for Signal, the Department of Justice, and Federal Bureau of Investigation did not immediately respond to CNBC’s requests for comment.</p> <p>One possibility is that a recipient with access to the messages handed them over to investigators. The complaint references group messages run on the app, so it’s possible a participant in those chats cooperated.</p> <p>Encryption has been a point of controversy between investigators and tech companies for years. While law enforcement officers worry that criminals will exploit encrypted technology to hide wrongdoing, tech companies like Apple have taken the privacy side of the argument.</p> <p>Investigators have in the past tried to get tech companies to open their devices to assist in probing serious crimes, but companies like Apple argue that if they break encryption, it will jeopardize the entire system and potentially help foreign adversaries to exploit weaknesses.</p> <p>The issue gained particular prominence in 2015, when Apple refused to break the encryption of a suspect’s iPhone in the wake of a mass shooting in San Bernardino, Calif. After a tense standoff, investigators were eventually able to break the encryption without Apple’s help.</p>

	<p>But some law enforcement specialists have said newer security features on iPhone software now makes it harder for them to technically access those devices, even if they are able to obtain a warrant.</p> <p>The issue came up again under the Trump administration, including when Facebook, now known as Meta Platforms, announced plans to stitch together all of its messaging services and encrypt them from end to end. Investigators said the plans would hamper their ability to clamp down on child sexual abuse material on the platform.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 Arrests: 29 in six-state shoplifting ring
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/29-charged-in-6-state-shoplifting-ring-that-hit-pharmacies/
GIST	<p>TULSA, Okla. (AP) — State and federal authorities announced Thursday that they arrested and charged more than two dozen people for taking part in a multistate shoplifting ring that made off with more than \$10 million in stolen goods over the past few years, most of which was over-the-counter medications.</p> <p>U.S. Attorney Clint Johnson in Tulsa and Oklahoma Attorney General John O'Connor announced state and federal charges against 29 defendants. Johnson said 25 of those charged had been arrested and four others were still at large.</p> <p>Prosecutors said the defendants took part in a conspiracy to steal mostly over-the-counter medications from retailers such as Walmart, Costco, Walgreens, CVS and GNC in Arkansas, Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma and Texas. The ringleaders would then arrange for the sale of the items on websites such as Amazon and eBay.</p> <p>“Consumers and businesses incur a high price for thieves who commit larcenies and profit by selling their stolen goods to well-organized theft rings,” said Tulsa Police Chief Wendell Franklin, whose department launched its investigation in 2019 after an organized crime investigator from a pharmacy retailer shared information about bulk thefts from its Tulsa-area locations. “Thieves should take notice. Tulsa is not going to capitulate and allow criminals to disrupt commerce in our city.”</p> <p>Prosecutors allege that a 48-year-old Tulsa woman, Linda Been, led the ring, which netted an estimated \$4.5 million from the sale of stolen goods such as Flonase, Mucinex, Nexium and Allegra to fencing organizations outside of Oklahoma that then sold the merchandise on e-commerce sites. They allege that Been, whose name is listed in jail records as Linda Gann, would provide shoplifters with a detailed list of items to steal and pay for their expenses when they traveled out of state. She also would pay for the shoplifters’ bond if they were arrested, prosecutors allege.</p> <p>State and federal court records don’t indicate whether Been has an attorney who might speak on her behalf.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 ‘Unintentional mistakes’ Petito police stop
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/probe-finds-unintentional-mistakes-in-petito-police-stop/
GIST	<p>SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — An investigation has found that Utah police made “several unintentional mistakes” when they stopped Gabby Petito and her boyfriend before she was killed in what became a high-profile missing person case.</p> <p>The independent report released Wednesday examines a traffic stop by police in the tourist town of Moab on Aug. 12. Officers investigated a fight between Petito and her boyfriend Brian Laundrie but ultimately allowed the couple to leave after requiring them to spend a night apart.</p> <p>Police body camera video of a visibly upset Petito, 22, was widely viewed as the investigation unfolded and raised questions about whether a different police response could have prevented her death weeks later. Laundrie, 23, later killed himself after being named the only person of interest in her death.</p>

The report faults officers for not issuing a domestic violence citation to Petito after she told police she had hit her boyfriend first, though it also points to indications she was likely a victim in the broader scope of the relationship. The report also faults investigators for failing to take a statement from a 911 caller who had reported seeing the couple outside their van and a man slapping a girl.

“Would Gabby be alive today if this case was handled differently? That is an impossible question to answer despite it being the answer many people want to know. Nobody knows and nobody will ever know the answer to that question,” wrote Capt. Brandon Ratcliffe, from the police department in Price, Utah, who prepared the report.

The ultimately tragic search for Petito drew worldwide attention, sparking social media sleuthing, discussions about dating violence and shining a light on the disproportionate coverage of missing white women in the U.S. compared to other missing persons.

Long before their names appeared in headlines, the couple was stopped by police officers during a cross-country trip. Their van was seen speeding and hit a curb near the entrance to Arches National Park. Laundrie told police the couple got into a minor scuffle that began when he climbed into the van with dirty feet.

Petito told a similar story, and faulted her own desire to keep the converted camper van clean. She told police she had hit him first, and since Laundrie was injured but declined to press charges officers separated the couple and then allowed them to leave.

Petito was reported missing a month after that traffic stop, and her strangled body was discovered Sept. 19 on the edge of Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming. Laundrie was the only person ever identified by law enforcement officials as a person of interest in the case. He was found dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound in a swamp after returning alone to his parents’ home in Florida. Both were originally from Long Island, New York.

Utah law says police should cite an aggressor in domestic violence assaults. In this case, police didn’t cite anyone, finding the incident was more of a mental or emotional health break.

One officer who argued against citing Petito said Laundrie might bail her out of jail and then have “more control over her.”

That officer told investigators that if he had known she was in life-threatening danger he would have taken his own time to follow them. “I would have done anything to stop it if I would have known that was coming ... I am devastated about it.”

The city of Moab said they would follow the report’s recommendations, though they also said the officers “showed kindness, respect and empathy in their handling of this incident.”

The report found that the officers did what they thought was right at the time, and responsibility for Petito’s death lays with her killer alone.

Nevertheless the report recommends improved training, especially in domestic violence investigation, and that the officers involved be put on probation or have existing probation extended.

Ratcliffe wrote that while it appears Petito was the aggressor in the specific fight Moab police investigated, that wasn’t necessarily the tenor of their relationship.

“There have been many times in my career where someone who we know from past experience to be a long-term victim of domestic violence, gets arrested for committing an act of domestic violence against their long-term abuser,” Ratcliffe wrote. “It’s very likely Gabby was a long-term victim of domestic violence, whether that be physically, mentally, and/or emotionally.”

HEADLINE	01/13 One of largest child porn dealers east WA
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/tri-cities-businessmans-secret-double-life-one-of-largest-child-porn-dealers-in-eastern-washington/
GIST	<p>KENNEWICK — A Kennewick man who used his family’s business to distribute a “mass quantity” of child pornography was ordered to spend nearly 10 years in a state prison.</p> <p>Daniel Bunch, 42, was ordered earlier this month to serve the maximum sentence for five pornography charges following a more than two-year investigation that began with the FBI.</p> <p>The case originated with federal agents in February 2017, and a Tri-Cities detective with the Southeast Regional Internet Crimes Against Children (SER-ICAC) task force was brought in months later to help pinpoint where the downloads were happening and who was responsible.</p> <p>Investigators described Bunch as one of the largest distributors of child pornography in Eastern Washington.</p> <p>“The image and video files depicted horrific scenes of the rape and molestation of children of all ages, including toddlers and infants. Some of the image and video files included bondage and restraints,” said a statements posted by Benton County Prosecutor Andy Miller.</p> <p>“By his own admission, Bunch engaged in such conduct for years,” said Miller.</p> <p>He used the IP addresses of his family’s business, Bunch Finnigan Appliances near downtown Kennewick, to facilitate his crimes, and the software allowed him to access the files remotely from any location.</p> <p>“Forensic examiners on the case located multiple terabytes of image and video files of child sexual abuse on electronic devices belonging to Bunch, and determined that he had distributed terabytes of said image and video files to other persons online.”</p> <p>Bunch pleaded guilty in November 2021 to three counts of first-degree dealing in depictions of a minor engaged in sexually explicit conduct, and two counts of first-degree possession of depictions of a minor engaged in sexually explicit conduct.</p> <p>Guilty plea</p> <p>Federal prosecutors declined to take up the case so long as Bunch admitted guilt to all five counts by that date. If not, he could have been indicted in federal court.</p> <p>Bunch had been out of custody on bail for more than two years and collapsed in court the day he pleaded guilty, when he was told he’d have to sit in the county jail until his sentencing.</p> <p>The sentencing range was seven years and three months to nine years and eight months in prison. He also will have to register as a sex offender and get treatment with a certified provider.</p> <p>At the sentencing in Benton County Superior Court, Bunch’s attorney requested the bottom of the sentencing range and prosecutors argued for the maximum.</p> <p>Judge Jacqueline Stam settled on the longest term, noting that each image and video file depicted a child victim who, by virtue of Bunch’s conduct, would continue to experience lifelong trauma and victimization as his or her images were viewed and distributed.</p> <p>She said the breadth and content of material, as well as the protection of the community, warranted the maximum sentence, said Miller’s post, calling it, “Such a sad, awful case.”</p>

He said Stam agreed with prosecutors that it was clear Bunch had lived the double life of a loved and cherished son, brother and community member while also “secretly possessing, distributing and receiving sexual gratification from video and image files depicting the sexual abuse of children.”

Child porn files

Bunch was an employee at the family business when detectives searched the store late July 10, 2019, and found the massive stash of child pornography on hard drives.

A laptop was found behind a box on top of a safe. A 3 terabyte (TB) external hard drive connected to the concealed laptop was 99% full of child porn images and videos and a 10TB external hard drive was 2% full, according to court documents.

The storage capacity of a 3TB drive includes about 600,000 digital photos, 1,500 hours of videos or 750,000 4-minute songs.

Detectives said Bunch was online at the time of the search and accessing the store’s computer network remotely. They went to his house and arrested him about 3:30 a.m. July 11.

He was fired from the business later that month.

Brother’s charges

Meanwhile, Bunch’s younger brother is awaiting trial Feb. 22 for his own child pornography charges.

It was during the investigation into Daniel Bunch’s case that detectives allegedly discovered downloaded files with explicit videos on David I. Bunch’s laptop and hard drive.

David Bunch had a small quantity of child porn on his electronics compared to his brother’s large stash, court documents said.

He told detectives he stashed his laptop at the office because the father of three knew it contained pornography, both adult and child, documents said.

The brothers reportedly did not know about each other’s interest in child exploitation material.

David Bunch is charged with two counts of first-degree possession of depictions of a minor engaged in sexually explicit conduct.

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HEADLINE	01/13 Study: WSP ‘disproportionality’ searches
SOURCE	https://crosscut.com/equity/2022/01/wa-troopers-still-more-likely-pull-over-native-american-drivers
GIST	<p>Two years after InvestigateWest reported that the Washington State Patrol was searching some racial and ethnic groups at a rate one researcher called “disturbing.” the agency has released a new analysis of its stop-and-search data. The headline: “No systematic agency bias.”</p> <p>The State Patrol and Washington State University researchers who released the study this month, however, acknowledge the problem InvestigateWest uncovered in 2019 persists. State troopers are still more likely to search Black, Latino, Native American and Pacific Islander drivers, even though the troopers are more likely to find contraband like drugs or weapons when they search white drivers.</p> <p>“The numbers have improved over the years,” said Chris Loftis, a State Patrol spokesman. “But the improvement has been modest in that particular situation, and modest isn’t good enough.”</p> <p>In a news release announcing the study, WSU said researchers didn’t find “intentional, agency-level racial bias.” Statewide, they found no evidence that members of Black, Indigenous, Latino and other communities of color were being stopped at a rate higher than their populations and noted “minimal” differences between day and night stops, the latter a more widely recognized metric for determining bias.</p>

But WSU's analysis of more than 7 million State Patrol interactions with the public from 2015 to 2019 found that state troopers stop Black drivers at a rate disproportionate to the Black population in King and Pierce counties, and found a similar disparity for Latino drivers in Benton County.

Christina Sanders, the director of WSU's division of governmental studies and services and one of the researchers involved, said that "disproportionality" warrants additional study.

"Disproportionality doesn't make it biased," Sanders said. "We're working with the patrol to figure out who to talk to next, what kind of data to look at next, what is going on in places we have seen disproportionality."

David B. Owens, a University of Washington law professor who worked with similar police data in Houston, cautioned against drawing conclusions about the presence or lack of intentional bias or discrimination from a statistical analysis. He said the disparities in stop-and-search rates "support a strong inference of biased policing." It's not evidence police are consciously targeting certain races, Owens said, but it suggests that race is playing a role — consciously or unconsciously — in the decision to stop and search.

"For there to be some assumed criminality of particular communities does not require an individual officer themselves to be racist," Owens said. "This is part of the fabric that is woven into police training. This is part of the fabric that is woven into our laws."

High-discretion searches, such as consent searches or canine searches when policy doesn't dictate one, are [a popular metric for police researchers](#). There's a baseline — the demographics of people stopped — against which to compare how often officers search different racial and ethnic groups. When one group is searched at a higher rate than another, but the "hit" rate — the likelihood of finding contraband — is lower, it suggests police are setting a lower bar to justify searching members of that community.

WSU found that troopers were nearly five times as likely to search Native American drivers as they were white drivers, slightly better than InvestigateWest's findings from 2009 to 2015. When WSU researchers took into account other factors, like gender, traffic violations and time of day, the disparity decreased. Taking into account those factors, Black drivers were 1.16 times more likely to be searched than white drivers, Latino drivers were 1.58 times more likely and Native American drivers were 2.77 times more likely. The State Patrol isn't alone. Stanford University researchers, whose data the InvestigateWest analysis used, have [found similar problems across the country](#).

Experts said those disparities result in an unequal application of the law — white drivers are less likely to face consequences for illegal activity — and drive a wedge between police and the communities they serve. That can spill over into other areas of policing.

"The reason these communities are interacting with police is because they're being stopped more," Owens said. "If you can reduce negative police interactions on the front end, you can reduce the chances those negative interactions result in use of force or violence."

Clay Mosher, a WSU sociology professor who was not involved in the most recent study but [conducted similar analyses in the past](#), said it's "a good thing" the state is renewing the studies. He agreed with the finding that there's no evidence of statewide discrimination by troopers. Still, Mosher acknowledged, the State Patrol is more or less where it was almost 15 years ago, when he and colleagues recommended investigating the search-rate disparities. Loftis, the State Patrol spokesperson, said the agency abandoned those studies in 2007 because of lack of funds.

"The next step is to try to drill down into the data and look at individual troopers," Mosher said. "Are there troopers within particular counties who are more likely to search than others? And, if so, what do they look like and what's the reason for that? To me that's the next kind of logical step in this, which we never really got to either."

Sanders said WSU will conduct focus groups around the state in an effort to better understand the disparities. She said researchers will work with the State Patrol to collect data that is easier to analyze and seek input from its leadership about “how best to follow up.”

“I think what we’re going to have to do probably is start looking at different locations and analyze that on a local level,” Sanders said. “The State Patrol collects a lot of data already. I’m not sure they’re going to need to collect more data, but [collect it in] a format easier to convert to analysis.”

State Rep. Gina Mosbrucker, R-Goldendale, who authored legislation funding WSU’s study, praised the State Patrol’s performance as well.

“Overall I’m really happy with the results, and I do honestly believe they’re willing to train or do whatever they need to,” Mosbrucker said.

Mosbrucker, the ranking member of the House Public Safety Committee, said she supports WSU’s plans to hold focus groups. But she called the continued search-rate disparities “concerning.”

“I do think they need to investigate more,” she said. “I think the answers are with those who are most affected.”

In 2020, the Legislature also gave the State Patrol, whose commissioned officer ranks are nearly 90% percent male and 90% white in a state that’s only 61.6% white, funds to conduct a diversity study. That report, [released in March](#), criticized a hiring process that doesn’t attract a diverse enough pool of recruits and a psychological evaluation process that resulted in “disproportionally high fail rates for people of color.”

State Rep. Javier Valdez, D-Seattle, said he’ll be working with Gov. Jay Inslee to set benchmarks for the State Patrol to improve its diversity and address disparities in search rates.

“If we’re going to build trust in our communities throughout the state, and especially for people of color to build that trust with law enforcement, the numbers need to show people of color aren’t being targeted at a disproportionate rate,” said Valdez, who authored the legislation funding the diversity study.

The State Patrol’s Loftis said that over the past two years the agency has hired a diversity, equity and inclusion director, begun contracting with an outside firm to conduct psychological evaluations and pledged to have 30% female recruiting classes by 2030 — right now about 10% of recruits are women.

“One thing the study points out is that disproportionality is not in itself an indicator of racial bias,” Loftis said. “In absence of evidence of bias, we are diligently looking through each possibility, but we have not and will never abandon the idea that we must always search for bias and eliminate it however and wherever it is found.”

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HEADLINE	01/13 Indicted: 3 beat airline security officer
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/transportation/2022/01/13/delta-airlines-attack-ifk-airport/
GIST	<p>Three women were indicted Thursday for allegedly punching and beating an airline security officer who tried to block them from boarding their Delta Air Lines flight to Puerto Rico last fall, prosecutors said.</p> <p>Jordan Nixon, 21, Janessa Torres, 21, and Johara Zavala, 44, all of Long Island, were arraigned Thursday in U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York. All three pleaded not guilty. They were released on \$25,000 bond and told they must limit their travel to New York City and Long Island.</p> <p>Peter Guadagnino, who is representing Nixon, said his client denies the allegations. Jacob Barclay Mitchell, who is representing Zavala, and Mia Eisner-Grynberg, who is representing Torres, declined to comment.</p>

According to an indictment unsealed Thursday, the alleged incident took place at John F. Kennedy International Airport on Sept. 22. The three women were scheduled to leave on a 12:55 p.m. flight to Puerto Rico, but they were acting belligerent and one appeared to be “visibly disoriented and possibly intoxicated” when approaching the boarding area, prosecutors said. One woman also refused to properly wear her mask.

In a separate filing in the case, prosecutors said the women had been scheduled to depart on an earlier flight slated to leave at 8:10 a.m. but were rebooked. In the time before their 12:55 p.m. departure, prosecutors allege, surveillance videos and receipts from bars and restaurants at the airport showed the women ordered about nine alcoholic beverages. When Nixon approached the gate, she was holding a clear to-go cup filled with an orange beverage that smelled alcoholic, according to court documents.

The gate agent reported the women’s behavior to the flight crew, and the flight’s captain and another crew member determined the trio should not be allowed to board the plane. After an airline security officer asked the women to leave the jetway, they refused, then began yelling and cursing, according to the filings.

The filings allege Nixon tapped the security officer on the head, then took his radio and began hitting him with it until he fell to the ground. When another employee tried to help the officer, Zavala punched that employee in the face, according to prosecutors. All three women then began punching and kicking the officer as he was on the floor. Torres allegedly stepped on his head and face, causing his upper lip to bleed. When he tried to get up to seek help from other crew members, the women allegedly grabbed him by his vest, tearing it.

Members of the flight crew eventually pulled the guard behind the glass doors of the jetway. The three women continued to “scream and strike at the flight crew.”

Both the gate agent and security officer were hospitalized and have not returned to their jobs, according to court papers.

In a statement that accompanied the announcement of the arrests and indictments, Breon Peace, U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of New York, said: “The extreme and aggressive behavior in connection with our air travel is out of control. This office has zero tolerance for violent conduct that threatens the safety of airline passengers and employees and will prosecute defendants who allegedly engage in such conduct to the fullest extent of the law.”

The number of incidents involving unruly passengers has risen sharply during the [coronavirus](#) pandemic, fueled in part by the federal mask mandate for transportation. Unions representing airline workers have repeatedly called on the Justice Department to more aggressively prosecute such cases.

In November, Attorney General Merrick Garland directed federal prosecutors to [prioritize investigations](#) into such crimes.

According to the Federal Aviation Administration, there have been 76 reports of such incidents so far this year. Last year, there were nearly 6,000 reports of unruly passenger behavior, and the agency initiated investigations into more than 1,000 incidents. The vast majority of incidents involve passengers who refuse to cooperate with the requirement that they wear a mask when flying.

While much attention has focused on passengers who act out on flights, there have also been incidents at airports.

The Transportation Security Administration, charged with enforcing the federal mask mandate in airports, on trains and in other transportation settings, said in September that it received more than [4,000 reports of mask-related incidents](#) since the requirement was put into place last year.

HEADLINE	01/13 Guild: need Covid shutdown jail operations
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3310967/king-county-corrections-guild-shutdown-jail-operations/
GIST	<p>The president of the King County Corrections Guild is calling for a total two week shutdown of all jail operations.</p> <p>There are just over 1,300 inmates in custody in King County. KCCG President Dennis Folk says nearly 34% totaling 460 inmates are either COVID positive or in COVID protocols. There are also 40 staff members in the same situation. That's led to tense situations among prison populations in the county.</p> <p>"We've had some incidents where inmates were refusing to let anybody into their cells, one night we thought we were going to have a riot," he told KIRO Newsradio.</p> <p>Given an already difficult staffing shortage of nearly 100 officers, Folk says they must have a two week quarantine and shut down immediately to keep inmates as well as staff families safe. Logistically, that would mean cutting back on the number of people booked into jail, excepting DUIs and assaults. Those who would still be booked would be quarantined themselves upon entry.</p> <p>Further exacerbating the situation is the fact that Folk anticipates another 35 to 40 staff vacancies by the summer, leaving King County jails with even fewer people to fill the gaps. The hope with a two-week operations shutdown is that there will be enough time to get COVID outbreaks under control, and ensure that facilities will be as close to fully staffed as possible in the coming months.</p> <p>"The reality is we no longer have the luxury of spreading the inmates around in the various units or maintaining social distancing," Folk warned.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 Judge tosses teen's sex assault conviction
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/us/drew-clinton-released-sexual-assault.html
GIST	<p>Last October, a judge in western Illinois convicted an 18-year-old man of sexually assaulting a 16-year-old girl while she was unconscious at a graduation party.</p> <p>The man, Drew Clinton, faced a mandatory minimum sentence of four years in prison, but at a hearing earlier this month, Judge Robert Adrian reversed his own decision and threw out the conviction. The nearly five months Mr. Clinton had served in jail, the judge said, was "plenty of punishment."</p> <p>The decision, which was reported by the Herald-Whig of Quincy, Ill., has dismayed organizations that help survivors of sexual assault, the Adams County state's attorney's office and the girl who reported the assault, who told a local television station that she was present when Judge Adrian overturned Mr. Clinton's conviction.</p> <p>"He made me seem like I fought for nothing and that I put my word out there for no reason," she told WGEM-TV. "I immediately had to leave the courtroom and go to the bathroom. I was crying."</p> <p>In a statement, Gary L. Farha, the Adams County state's attorney, said the girl had endured "a trauma beyond what should be required of anyone and a system that traumatized her and victimized her again."</p> <p>"She did nothing to warrant this attack," Mr. Farha said. "She is deserving of our support. She is worthy of our respect."</p> <p>Andrew C. Schnack III, a lawyer for Mr. Clinton, did not respond to messages seeking comment.</p> <p>Mr. Clinton was charged with criminal sexual assault on June 1, 2021. The girl reported that he sexually assaulted her after she became intoxicated at a party on May 30, according to court records.</p>

During the bench trial, she testified that she was unconscious and woke up to find a pillow covering her face and Mr. Clinton assaulting her.

“She at no time gave consent,” Anita M. Rodriguez, the assistant state’s attorney who prosecuted the case, said during Mr. Clinton’s sentencing hearing on Jan. 3, according to a transcript. “In fact, earlier in the evening, she had specifically indicated that she did not want any sexual contact with this defendant.”

Mr. Schnack argued that mandatory sentences take away a judge’s discretion.

“Every individual should be judged by the court in doing its sentence and not by a legislator years and hundreds of miles removed,” he said, according to the transcript.

He also said that prosecutors had not proved their case against Mr. Clinton and that the girl was able to consent. Mr. Schnack said that she made many decisions that night, including drinking and stripping down to her underwear to go swimming.

“They weren’t the best decisions,” he said. “She did know what was going on.”

Judge Adrian said he knew that, by law, Mr. Clinton was supposed to serve time in prison, but in this case, the sentence was unfair, partly because Mr. Clinton turned 18 just two weeks before the party and, until his arrest, had no criminal record.

“That is not just,” Judge Adrian said during the Jan. 3 hearing, according to the transcript. “There is no way for what happened in this case that this teenager should go to the Department of Corrections. I will not do that.”

He said that if he ruled that the sentence was unconstitutional, his decision would be reversed on appeal. Instead, he said, what he could do was “find that the people failed to prove their case.”

Judge Adrian chastised the parents and other adults who he said provided liquor to the teenagers at the party and failed “to exercise their parental responsibilities.”

This is what happens, he said, “when we have people, adults, having parties for teenagers, and they allow coeds and female people to swim in their underwear in their swimming pool.”

“And, no,” the judge added, “underwear is not the same as swimming suits.”

Carrie Ward, the chief executive of the Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault, said the judge’s comments and his decision to throw out Mr. Clinton’s conviction were “a clean and clear example of victim blaming.”

By highlighting the girl’s clothing and chastising the hosts of the party, the judge shifted “100 percent of the blame from the perpetrator, from the actual person who committed the sexual assault, to everyone else, including the victim,” Ms. Ward said.

She said she was worried that other victims of sexual assault would now be even more hesitant to report an attack. “One of the most significant reasons victims do not come forward is the feeling that they might be blamed for their own behavior,” she said.

In her interview with WGEM, the girl said she hoped that what had happened in her case would not dissuade others from coming forward to report sexual assault.

“They need to come out with what happens to them, she said, “and not just let the guy get away.”

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SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/us/politics/federal-prisoners-release.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — Thousands of federal inmates will become eligible for release this week under a rule the Justice Department published on Thursday that allows more people to participate in a program that allows prisoners to earn shorter jail terms.</p> <p>As part of those guidelines, the Federal Bureau of Prisons has begun transferring eligible inmates to supervised release programs, residential re-entry centers or home confinement.</p> <p>The rule, together with a decision by the department last month that well-behaved inmates released to home confinement during the pandemic would not have to return to prison, is a major step toward overhauling and shrinking the federal prison system, which some Democrats and Republicans consider costly and often unfair.</p> <p>The guidelines published in the Federal Register on Thursday affect how the Justice Department and the Bureau of Prisons carry out the First Step Act, the sweeping bipartisan criminal justice legislation enacted in 2018 under the Trump administration. The measure expands job training and other efforts aimed at reducing recidivism, expands early-release programs and modifies sentencing laws.</p> <p>The law gave the Justice Department and the Bureau of Prisons leeway in interpreting some aspects of its implementation, including whether credits for good behavior and job training accrued before the law was passed could be used to apply for early release. Under former Attorney General William P. Barr, the department had proposed a rule that would count only credits assigned and completed after Jan. 15, 2020.</p> <p>Critics argued that the proposed rule did not accurately reflect the intent of the lawmakers who had drafted the bill, and that it kept thousands of people behind bars who should be immediately released.</p> <p>Last May, Senators Richard J. Durbin, Democrat of Illinois and the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and Charles E. Grassley of Iowa, the panel's top Republican, pressed the Justice Department and the Bureau of Prisons to revise the proposed rule.</p> <p>The senators said the proposed rule deterred prisoners from participating in First Step Act programs and undercut the effectiveness of the law. They said that it included limitations that were not part of the act, and penalties that were unduly harsh.</p> <p>“While losing hard-earned credits would be easy, the rule makes restoring credits too difficult,” they wrote.</p> <p>In the guidelines announced Thursday, the Justice Department said inmates could apply credits that had been earned as far back as 2018, when the First Step Act was enacted, subject to the Bureau of Prisons determining eligibility.</p> <p>Justice Action Network, a bipartisan criminal justice reform group, said that the new guidelines could result in the release of as many people as were freed immediately after passage of First Step Act, which was more than 3,100. The home confinement decision had already affected about 2,800 inmates. There are 157,596 federal inmates, according to the Bureau of Prisons.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/13 Calif. governor denies Sirhan Sirhan parole
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/us/sirhan-sirhan-denied-parole.html
GIST	SACRAMENTO — Gov. Gavin Newsom of California on Thursday denied parole to Sirhan B. Sirhan , departing from the recommendation of a state parole panel in August that the man convicted of assassinating Robert F. Kennedy be freed.

“Mr. Sirhan’s assassination of Senator Kennedy is among the most notorious crimes in American history,” the governor wrote in his decision, saying he had weighed the recommendation but determined that Mr. Sirhan, 77, who has spent more than 50 years in prison, still poses an unreasonable threat to public safety.

“After decades in prison, he has failed to address the deficiencies that led him to assassinate Senator Kennedy,” the governor wrote. “Mr. Sirhan lacks the insight that would prevent him from making the same types of dangerous decisions he made in the past.”

The announcement, made after nearly five months of deliberation, was widely expected, and Mr. Kennedy’s widow, Ethel Kennedy, and six of his nine surviving children said in a statement that they were grateful and “deeply relieved.” Mr. Newsom, a Democrat, had noted repeatedly that most of the Kennedy heirs opposed Mr. Sirhan’s release, as had state parole commissioners at 15 prior parole hearings.

The governor has also repeatedly expressed his admiration for Mr. Kennedy and noted at a news conference in September that “the first photograph — the only photograph — you will see in my office is a photo of my father and Bobby Kennedy just days before Bobby Kennedy was murdered.”

Angela Berry, a lawyer for Mr. Sirhan, said in a statement that she planned to challenge the governor’s decision. “Not an iota of evidence exists to suggest Mr. Sirhan is still a danger to society,” she said.

New laws passed after Mr. Sirhan’s previous parole hearing, in 2016, had required the state to consider his advanced age and his relative youth at the time the crime was committed. Mr. Sirhan was 24 when he shot Mr. Kennedy, a New York senator campaigning for president in 1968, in the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. Mr. Kennedy was walking through the hotel’s pantry shortly after winning California’s Democratic primary.

A Jerusalem-born Palestinian who had emigrated to the United States from Jordan, Mr. Sirhan almost immediately confessed; he [said in a television interview from prison in 1989](#) that he had killed Mr. Kennedy because he felt betrayed by the senator’s proposal during the campaign to send 50 military planes to Israel. Since then, however, he has said he does not remember committing the crime.

Factoring in to the recommendation of the parole commissioners was the absence of a prosecutor at the hearing, the first time Mr. Sirhan’s plea for parole went unchallenged by Los Angeles County. George Gascón, [its progressive district attorney](#), has made it a policy for prosecutors not to attend parole hearings, saying the parole board has all the facts it needs to make an informed decision.

At the hearing, which was conducted virtually because of the coronavirus pandemic, Mr. Sirhan said he “must have” brought the gun to the scene but could not recall much about the shooting. His lawyer argued that there was no need to keep the aging man in prison, where he had grappled with a heart condition, prostate cancer and [an attempt on his life](#) by another prisoner in 2019.

Robert Barton, one of the two parole commissioners on the panel, noted that Mr. Sirhan had improved himself by taking classes in prison, and two of the senator’s sons urged leniency, diverging from the rest of the family.

One son, Douglas Kennedy, who is a correspondent for Fox News, said he felt “compassion” for Mr. Sirhan, and another son, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., pointed to his “impressive record of rehabilitation.” [A prominent promoter of vaccine misinformation](#), Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has said he thinks Mr. Sirhan is innocent.

But most of the Kennedy family was adamant in insisting that Mr. Sirhan be kept behind bars. Six of the senator’s nine surviving children signed a statement urging the governor not to release the person who “took our father from our family” and “from America.” Mr. Kennedy’s widow, now 93, also urged against parole.

	“Our family and our country suffered an unspeakable loss due to the inhumanity of one man,” the family wrote in a statement. “We believe in the gentleness that spared his life, but in taming his act of violence, he should not have the opportunity to terrorize again.”
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HEADLINE	01/13 Feds indict Baltimore top prosecutor
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/us/marilyn-mosby-baltimore-charged.html
GIST	<p>Marilyn Mosby, Baltimore’s top prosecutor, was indicted Thursday on charges that she perjured herself to obtain money from a retirement fund and made false statements on loan applications to buy two vacation homes in Florida.</p> <p>The charges against Ms. Mosby, 41, who was first elected state’s attorney in 2014 and drew national attention the following year for her handling of the death of Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old Black man who died in police custody, came after a monthslong investigation by federal authorities.</p> <p>Ms. Mosby filed two requests in 2020 to withdraw about \$90,000 from her city retirement account, according to the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Maryland.</p> <p>She faces two counts of perjury for those requests, which were made through the CARES Act, because she claimed that the pandemic had caused her financial difficulties. But at the time, she was fully employed and making almost \$250,000 a year, according to the indictment.</p> <p>“Rather than experiencing a reduction in income in 2020, Mosby’s gross salary in 2020 increased,” the indictment said, noting that she had received a raise of nearly \$10,000 from the year before.</p> <p>She also faces two counts of making false statements on a loan application for two vacation homes in Florida, prosecutors said.</p> <p>Ms. Mosby used the money she had withdrawn for down payments on the homes, according to the indictment. She did not disclose on her mortgage applications that she owed more than \$45,000 in taxes to the Internal Revenue Service. In March 2020, the I.R.S. placed a lien on all the properties belonging to Ms. Mosby. The lien also applied to her husband, Nick Mosby, president of the Baltimore City Council. He is not charged in the case.</p> <p>Prosecutors said that Ms. Mosby also did not reveal her tax troubles in an agreement she had signed with a management company to rent out one of the vacation homes. That way, they said, she could obtain a lower interest rate on her mortgage.</p> <p>The mortgages amounted to more than \$900,000 for both homes — which were in Kissimmee and Longboat Key — according to the indictment. She was listed as the sole owner of both homes. In November, she sold the Kissimmee property, an eight-bedroom home, according to property records.</p> <p>If convicted, Ms. Mosby would face a maximum sentence of five years in prison on each of the perjury counts and 30 years on each of the charges of making false loan applications.</p> <p>A. Scott Bolden, Ms. Mosby’s lawyer, vigorously denied the charges against his client and labeled them “bogus.”</p> <p>In an interview on Thursday night, he said that the investigation was part of a “historical attack on Black female prosecutors.” Ms. Mosby had no plans to step down from her position, he added.</p> <p>Mr. Bolden said that Ms. Mosby contended that she had financial hardship because she owned a travel start-up, and that she did not disclose the tax lien on her properties because she did not know about it. He said that Ms. Mosby’s husband handled the couple’s taxes.</p> <p>Mr. Mosby did not respond to emails on Thursday night.</p>

When Ms. Mosby became state's attorney for Baltimore City in 2015, she was 34 years old, the youngest top prosecutor of any major American city.

Three months into her term, Freddie Gray [died in police custody](#) after sustaining a spinal cord injury. Video footage showed officers carrying his limp body into a police van. His death fueled protests against excessive force and amplified awareness of police killings of Black people. Riots broke out, and police cars were set on fire. The city was placed under curfew.

Two weeks after Mr. Gray's death, Ms. Mosby [announced she would prosecute](#) six officers. They were charged with crimes including manslaughter and murder. This decision was contested, with critics stating that she moved too hastily in what was inevitably an uphill battle.

Three officers were acquitted by a judge, who said there was insufficient evidence. Then, Ms. Mosby [dropped remaining charges](#) against three police officers, another divisive decision.

Still, in 2018, Ms. Mosby handily won another four-year term, which expires this year. At least two candidates have announced they will challenge her in this summer's Democratic primary. They expressed concern on social media on Thursday about Ms. Mosby's alleged actions.

Ms. Mosby and Gov. Larry Hogan of Maryland have repeatedly clashed over the proper approach to addressing violence in Baltimore.

In a [Fox News appearance](#) last month, Mr. Hogan blamed Ms. Mosby and her refusal to prosecute violent crime as a "big part of the problem" of escalating violence. Ms. Mosby responded with an open letter [accusing](#) Mr. Hogan of issuing "incessant dog-whistling attacks about Baltimore crime" and stoking fears to "score political points with your conservative base."

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HEADLINE	01/13 Landmark conviction Syria state violence
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/world/middleeast/verdict-syria-war-crimes.html
GIST	<p>When detainees arrived at the security office in Syria, it "welcomed" them with an hour of whipping or beating, they told a German court.</p> <p>They were held in packed, sweltering cells and fed potatoes that tasted like diesel. They drank from toilets. One recalled passing dead bodies in a hallway. A woman said interrogators inflicted electric shocks on her hands, legs and chest during questioning.</p> <p>In the world's first trial prosecuting state-sponsored torture in Syria, the German court, in Koblenz, on Thursday convicted the former intelligence official in charge of that security office, the notorious al-Khatib unit in Damascus, of crimes against humanity and sentenced him to life in prison.</p> <p>The ruling said the former officer, Anwar Raslan, 58, oversaw the torture of prisoners and the killing of at least 27 people, in addition to sexual abuse and "particularly grave rape" of detainees.</p> <p>Human rights lawyers and Syrian survivors hailed the verdict as a landmark in the international quest to hold accountable those who committed war crimes during nearly 11 years of war in Syria. It also set a precedent reaching far beyond Syria: It was the first to target atrocities by a government that is still in power, said Stefanie Bock, the director of the International Research and Documentation Center for War Crimes Trials at the University of Marburg in Germany.</p> <p>"This was a very important verdict," Ms. Bock said. "The signal is: There is no safe haven for war criminals. It's a clear sign that the world will not stand by and do nothing."</p>

But the conviction also highlighted the stark limitations of international efforts to bring war criminals from countries like Syria to justice. Mr. Raslan, who served as a colonel in a Syrian intelligence service, was ultimately just a cog in the extensive machinery of repression in Syria.

Many Syrians far more powerful than Mr. Raslan — accused not only of committing more extensive crimes, but of crafting policies that resulted in mass civilian deaths — are still living freely in Syria, including its autocratic president, Bashar al-Assad.

“My question is: Is this the type of justice we’re looking for?” said Lina Mouhmade, who testified about being detained in Mr. Raslan’s center in 2012. “Honestly, the justice I am looking for is prosecuting Bashar himself and his collaborators, who are still committing horrifying crimes.”

Mr. Raslan left Syria in 2012, in the war’s second year, and joined the political opposition, which helped him secure a visa to Germany in 2014. The war continued to rage for several more years, with Syrian forces using [poison gas](#), imposing starvation sieges on rebellious communities and reducing residential neighborhoods to rubble through bombing campaigns.

Both the rebels who tried and failed to oust Mr. al-Assad, and jihadists from Al Qaeda and the Islamic State who took advantage of the conflict’s chaos, also committed war crimes.

But only a few perpetrators on all sides have been prosecuted.

One reason, experts say, is that unlike leading Nazis after World War II or Rwandan officials who were convicted of the atrocities they committed, the Syrian government, whose military and security services are responsible for the bulk of the violence in the country, remains in power, preventing the apprehension of its leaders and officers.

Mr. al-Assad and his senior advisers and military commanders rarely travel abroad. When they do, they go only to countries they can count on not to arrest them, like Russia, a staunch supporter of Mr. al-Assad.

Other potential avenues for justice have also been blocked. Syria is not a party to the International Criminal Court in The Hague, and Russia and China have used their vetoes on the United Nations Security Council to [prevent Syria from being referred to the court](#).

As a result, victims of the Syrian government and human rights lawyers have focused their efforts in countries that accept “[universal jurisdiction](#),” a principle stipulating that in the case of crimes against humanity and genocide, normal territorial restraints on prosecution do not apply.

Owing partly to its own Nazi-era history, Germany has become a go-to venue for such prosecutions. It has also become home to hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees, putting it at the center of efforts to prosecute Syrian officials.

Most of the Syrian refugees who arrived in Germany in 2015 and 2016 fled Mr. al-Assad’s forces. But some, like Mr. Raslan, had served in the president’s military and security services.

German prosecutors built their case against Mr. Raslan with the help of scores of Syrian witnesses in Germany and beyond. They also drew on a separate investigation that has been collecting evidence for over a decade to illuminate the Syrian state’s inner workings and command structure.

The concept of universal jurisdiction goes back to the Nuremberg trials, organized by the Allies after World War II to prosecute surviving members of the Nazi regime. Israel used it in the 1961 trial of the former Nazi official Adolf Eichmann, as did Spain in 1998 when demanding that Britain arrest Gen. [Augusto Pinochet, the former Chilean dictator](#).

Previous universal jurisdiction cases in Germany have dealt with crimes committed in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and, more recently, with the [genocide of Yazidis in Iraq](#) by members of the Islamic State.

When it comes to Syria, Thursday's verdict is only one small puzzle piece in the hope for justice, Ms. Bock said.

"In time, there needs to be a truth commission and alternative mechanisms to deal with all the injustices," she said. "You need to think very long term."

The Nuremberg trials went after the leading surviving members of the Nazi regime, but also after a range of individuals who played important roles in Nazi repression, including doctors, business leaders, bureaucrats and propagandists, said Wolfgang Kaleck, a founder of the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, which represented victims in Mr. Raslan's trial.

"That's what made it possible to get a picture of the whole apparatus that led to the Holocaust," Mr. Kaleck said. Mr. Raslan's trial, he added, "is a first step in trying to get a picture of the crimes committed by al-Assad's regime."

Other prosecutions are already being prepared. A [Syrian doctor](#) accused of torturing detainees in a secret military prison and killing at least one of them will soon stand trial in Germany on charges of crimes against humanity and causing grievous bodily harm.

Human rights lawyers concede that so far, the cases have targeted low- and middle-ranking Syrian officials [or soldiers](#). But lower-level prosecutions could facilitate future prosecutions of more senior officials by introducing documents, witness statements and knowledge about the Syrian state's operations into the court record, Mr. Kaleck said.

"If you don't start now, then in 10 years, you cannot get al-Assad or his chief of intelligence because you have no evidence," Mr. Kaleck said.

The verdict stirred complicated feelings among Syrians who were abused in Syrian prisons — some at the hands of Mr. Raslan himself.

Many rejoiced at knowing that a man who had overseen interrogations at a security office in Damascus was in the dock himself.

"This guy who once considered himself the tyrant, the powerful head of the station, I see him standing in court, weak and humiliated," said Mahran Aoiun, who was detained twice in the early years of the war. "And the people he tortured are stronger."

Others hoped that Mr. Raslan's conviction would draw attention to the many more crimes committed during the Syrian war that have not been prosecuted, and to the officials who committed them but are still free.

"It is the beginning of a path," said Wassim Mukdad, who was jailed four times early in the uprising and said he was interrogated by Mr. Raslan himself. "It will be a long one toward justice."

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HEADLINE	01/13 Militia leader arrested: seditious conspiracy
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/us/politics/oath-keepers-stewart-rhodes.html
GIST	Stewart Rhodes, the leader and founder of the far-right Oath Keepers militia, was arrested on Thursday and charged along with 10 others with seditious conspiracy over what prosecutors said was their wide-ranging plot to storm the Capitol on Jan. 6 last year and disrupt the certification of Joseph R. Biden Jr.'s electoral victory.

The arrest of Mr. Rhodes, 56, was a major development in the sprawling investigation of the Capitol attack. He and the other Oath Keepers are the first to be charged with sedition among the more than 700 people accused so far of taking part in the assault.

Mr. Rhodes was arrested shortly before 1 p.m. at his home in Granbury, Texas, his lawyer, Jonathon Moseley, said.

The Justice Department has brought [a variety of charges](#) in connection with the Capitol attack; it has prosecuted about 275 people for obstructing Congress's duty to certify the 2020 presidential vote count, for example. But it had not previously brought a sedition charge, with the [legal weight and political overtones](#) it carries about an election in a highly polarized country.

The charge of seditious conspiracy, which can be difficult to prove, requires prosecutors to show that at least two people agreed to use force to overthrow government authority or delay the execution of a U.S. law. It carries a maximum of sentence of 20 years in prison.

The last time federal prosecutors brought a sedition case was in 2010, when they accused members of a Michigan militia of plotting to provoke an armed conflict with the government. They [were ultimately acquitted](#).

Prosecutors said that beginning only days after the 2020 election, Mr. Rhodes oversaw a seditious plot "to oppose the lawful transfer of presidential power by force." Some members of the Oath Keepers under his command broke into the Capitol in a military-style formation on Jan. 6 and went in search of Speaker Nancy Pelosi, [the indictment](#) said. Others, it said, were stationed in a hotel in Alexandria, Va., as an armed "quick reaction force," ready to rush into Washington if needed.

In addition to Mr. Rhodes, prosecutors charged Edward Vallejo, 63, of Phoenix, for the first time in connection with Jan. 6. The nine other militia members named in the indictment had all previously been charged, although not with sedition. Mr. Vallejo was part of the quick reaction force teams that the militia had deployed, which were equipped with firearms and other tactical equipment in case Mr. Rhodes called upon them to support the plot, prosecutors said. The teams included Oath Keepers from North Carolina, Florida and Arizona.

Mr. Rhodes, a former Army paratrooper who went on to earn a law degree at Yale, had been under investigation for his role in the riot since at least last spring when, against the advice of his lawyer, he sat down with F.B.I. agents for an interview in Texas. He was at the Capitol on Jan. 6, communicating by cellphone and a chat app with members of his team, [many of whom went into the building](#). But there is no evidence that he entered the Capitol.

Over 48 pages, the new indictment painted a detailed picture of Mr. Rhodes's activities starting only days after the 2020 election. Just two days after Election Day, Mr. Rhodes told several members of his group to refuse to accept Mr. Biden's victory, the indictment said.

"We aren't getting through this without a civil war," he wrote on the encrypted chat app Signal. "Too late for that. Prepare your mind, body, spirit."

One month later, after plotting with underlings in several states, the indictment said, Mr. Rhodes told members of his group on another encrypted Signal channel that they should use violence to stop Mr. Biden from taking office. "It will be a bloody and desperate fight," he wrote. "We are going to have a fight. That can't be avoided."

Through their lawyers, members of the Oath Keepers who are already facing charges have said they converged on Washington just before Jan. 6 not to attack the Capitol, but instead as part of a security detail hired to [protect conservative celebrities like Roger J. Stone Jr.](#), a longtime ally of former President Donald J. Trump.

In [an interview](#) with The New York Times last summer, Mr. Rhodes expressed frustration that several members of his group had “gone off mission” by entering the Capitol on Jan. 6, quickly adding, “There were zero instructions from me or leadership to do so.”

But at least four Oath Keepers who were at the Capitol that day and are cooperating with the government have sworn in court papers that the group intended to breach the building with the goal of obstructing the final certification of the Electoral College vote.

Mr. Rhodes has also attracted the attention of the House select committee investigating Jan. 6, which issued him a subpoena in November. In [a letter](#) at the time, House investigators noted that Mr. Rhodes had taken part in several events intended to question the integrity of the 2020 presidential election throughout that fall and winter.

On Election Day, the letter said, Mr. Rhodes said that an “honest” count of the votes could only result in a victory for Mr. Trump and called on members of his group to “stock up on ammo” and prepare for a “full-on war in the streets.”

With his distinctive black eye patch — the result of a gun accident — Mr. Rhodes has been a fixture on the far right almost from the day in 2009 that he announced the creation of the Oath Keepers at a rally in Lexington, Mass., the site of a famous Revolutionary War battle.

At the event, Mr. Rhodes laid out an antigovernment platform for the current and former law enforcement and military personnel who joined his group, saying that his plan was for members to disobey certain illegal orders from officials and instead to uphold their oath to the Constitution.

During the Obama administration, the Oath Keepers repeatedly inserted themselves into prominent public conflicts, often playing the role of heavily armed vigilantes. In 2014, for instance, [they turned up at a cattle ranch in Nevada](#) after its owner, Cliven Bundy, engaged in an armed standoff with federal land management officials. That same year, members of the group went to Ferguson, Mo., [on a self-appointed mission to protect local businesses](#) from riots prompted by the death of Michael Brown, a Black man who was shot by the police.

After Mr. Trump took office, Mr. Rhodes and the Oath Keepers pivoted away from their antigovernment views and appeared to embrace the new spirit of nationalism and suspicions of a deep-state conspiracy that had taken root among some of the president’s supporters. Like other far-right groups such as the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers also opposed — often physically — the Black Lives Matter protests that erupted in 2020 in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by the police in Minneapolis.

According to the indictment, Mr. Rhodes became more serious about stopping Mr. Biden from assuming office in early January, the same month he began spending thousands of dollars on military-grade firearms, ammunition and other tactical gear. Prosecutors have not accused him of bringing any weapons to Washington on Jan. 6, but they said that Mr. Vallejo and other members of the armed reaction force outside the city discussed the possibility of “armed conflict” and “guerrilla war.”

Mr. Rhodes seemed to relish the chaos at the Capitol on Jan. 6, prosecutors said. The indictment noted that shortly after 3 p.m. that day, a member of his Signal group chat sent him a message saying that members of Congress had been “given gas masks and are trying to get out.” Mr. Rhodes was said to have responded with a dismissive obscenity.

That evening, prosecutors said, Mr. Rhodes, Mr. Vallejo and other Oath Keepers met at an Olive Garden restaurant in Vienna, Va., to “celebrate their attack on the Capitol and discuss next steps.”

“Thousands of ticked off patriots spontaneously marched on the Capitol,” Mr. Rhodes wrote that night on his Signal group chat. “You ain’t seen nothing yet.”

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